

RECLAIMING BLACKNESS: (COUNTER) NARRATIVES OF RACIAL KINSHIP
IN BLACK GAY MEN'S SEXUAL STORIES

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT CHAMBERS

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2011

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Reclaiming Blackness: (Counter) Narratives of Racial Kinship

in Black Gay Men's Sexual Stories. (May 2011)

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Black gay male identities and their place within the social hierarchy are organized by interlocking systems of race, sexuality, gender and class. This produces the social marginality of black gay men in seemingly neutral ways. Prominent features of this systemic oppression are stock stories of black gay life that construct black gay men as pathological, dangerous, conflicted, inauthentically black, emasculated, and heretical within public and academic discourses. In order to better understand these dynamics and add to the empirical literature on race/sexuality intersections, fifty-two men identifying themselves as black/African American and as having relationships with other men, participated in semi-structured one-on-one interviews which explored their accounts of the structural arrangements, social interactions, and cultural meaning systems that defined the experience of being both black and gay in America. These interviews revealed that black gay men construct rich and complex counter narratives which not only expose the complex structural arrangements, cultural practices and racial ideologies

that produce their marginality, but also remediate black gay manhood as part of the black diaspora. These narrative challenges illuminated discursive, performative and cultural practices, as well as social interactions occurring in three areas of the men's lives. First, were strategic uses of a hegemonic masculine form I call the "Super Black Man" (SBM) by which the men counteract the heteronormative, and hypermasculine prerequisites of respectable black masculinity, and represent themselves as racially-conscious and respectable black men. Participants also constructed narrative challenges to those cultural repertoires produced by the black church which organize the dominant scripts of black, Christian identity. These accounts were distinguished by the academic resources they utilized to re-theorize the relationship between Christian faith and the black body, confront the white racial framing and heteronormative assumptions embedded in church doctrine, and transform their outsider status within these communities. Finally participants' narratives also illustrate multiple dimensions by which a black racial framing organizes their experiences as black gay men, and their connection to black communities. These negotiations suggest the need to theorize race/sexuality intersections as having both structural and interpretative dimensions and to see the intersection of race and culture as complicating the manifestation of racial inequality.

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DEDICATION

To mom and dad who taught me to value where an education could take me.

For all those black gay men eager to have their story told.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a project that could not have been possible without the support of many important individuals and groups. First, I give thanks to my parents who taught me to value education and to use it as a tool to make change happen in the world. I did this as much for them as I did for myself. While I miss them terribly, I am confident that they and the ancestors are celebrating this accomplishment along with me.

Over the years, I have encountered many faculty members who believed in me, told me that I had “potential” to do intellectual work (even if I did not see it in myself) and ultimately inspired me to attempt a Ph.D. While I owe a debt of gratitude to each of them – Bill Messmer, Doug Simon, Marylu McEwen, Susan Komives, Dee Royster and Deborah King – I wish to especially single out, Dee Royster and Deborah King whose constant support, mentoring and friendship during my years of graduate study made it possible for me to see this effort through to completion.

I wish to thank my committee members, Dr. Currier, Dr. Moore, and Dr. Jewell (and Dr. Gatson for agreeing to sit in on my defense at the last minute), for their support and guidance as I completed this project. I am grateful that you were willing to hang in there with me despite the time it took to complete this project, and that you were willing to work hurriedly to help me meet my deadlines. In direct and indirect ways, each of you has had an important influence on the final project in ways that required me to stretch intellectually; ultimately making this a better work than it would have been otherwise.

I owe a special and perhaps my greatest debt of gratitude to my committee chair, Joe Feagin. Despite the many times I gave up on myself while trying to complete this project (and nearly gave up on it), you never gave up on me. Thank you for continuing to believe in me and for being my intellectual guide and mentor over these many years. If I can one day make half the mark on the discipline that you have, that would barely begin to honor you for everything that you have given me over the years. Even still, I will always strive to make you proud of me.

To the rest of the “Feagin Five” who journeyed with me from Florida to Texas – Glenn, Kristen, Jenni and Ruth – I am often reflective about the special bond and connection we share. You have each been a significant part of my personal and intellectual journey, and I hope that we will continue to sharpen and support one another in our various intellectual and personal endeavors for many years to come.

As painful as the experience was, I am grateful to the reviewers who read and commented on the manuscript I submitted to *Gender & Society* in October of 2008 which was based on Chapter V of this dissertation. While I would have preferred the opportunity to have been published in that journal, their comments did ultimately inspire me to go deeper, and to push the work further both empirically and theoretically.

I could also not have completed this project without the support of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northeastern University and particularly the chair – Steve Vallas. Despite the fact that I needed additional time to complete this project and imposed upon your seemingly boundless patience, you continued to believe in me, support me, and provide me with a place to work. Ultimately, your support over

these past two years taught me many things about the process of producing a thoughtful and well-written manuscript. I am grateful to you for all of your efforts.

I want to thank my partner, Dr. Jacob van den Berg, for his patience and support these past four years while I tried to find my voice, my confidence and the tenacity to complete this project. I could not have completed this work without my biggest cheerleader, sounding board, and proofreader!

Finally, I wish to thank all of the men who agreed to be interviewed for this project. I hope that the final work has fulfilled their expectations and provides the voice and visibility they so richly deserve. Mostly, I hope that I have accurately conveyed some portion of the story these men wished to share with the world. Soon, my brothers, we won't have to live in silence anymore.

NOMENCLATURE

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
AME	African Methodist Episcopal church
CDC	U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CME	Christian Methodist Episcopal church
DL	Down Low
GLBT	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MCC	Metropolitan Community Church
MSM	Men Who Have Sex with Men
NCBLG	National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays
SBM	Super Black Man
SGL	Same Gender Loving
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
The Forum	National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum
TVC	Traditional Values Coalition

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: PATHOLOGICAL TALES ABOUT BLACK GAY MEN AND THE NEED FOR NEW EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This is a dissertation about stories. We all tell stories to convey information and to explain phenomenon. Stories help us make sense of the world by situating our personal experiences within a broader system of social ideologies, norms, values, practices and social relationships. This project examines a particular set of stories – those told by and about black gay men – in order to better understand how they see themselves as social actors, interpret their life experiences, and how those experiences fit within broader systems of racial and sexual hierarchy and domination. In short, this project hopes to illuminate the social factors that give shape to the stories told about black gay men and to the ones they tell about themselves.

I am inspired to look at black gay men's stories for three reasons. First, it is my story. As scholars, we are often drawn to topics that allow us to understand our own experiences and make meaning out of our own social locations, and this project is no different in that regard. But I am also drawn to explicate the narratives of black gay men because despite the preponderance of tales told about them, we know very little about this population and the social arrangements that shape their lives. This is surprising given that the 2000 Census reported that there are approximately 85,000 black same-sex

This dissertation follows the style of the *American Sociological Review*.

couples in the United States¹ which represents about 14% of all same-sex couples responding to the last Census (Moore 2010). Moreover, the demographic data show that nationally, these couples are well integrated within cities, towns and rural areas that are predominantly African-American making them more likely to live within black racial enclaves than to live within some of the more well-known gay ghettos that are populated by a high percentage of white men and women (Dang & Fraser 2004; Moore 2010).

Second, the predominant narrative about black gay² men has been and continues to be negative. Interestingly, it is an enduring tale whose basic elements can be traced all the way back to the early 20th century. During what is believed to be the first account of black gay life in America, the Newport Sex Scandal of 1919³ uncovered reports with

¹ The U.S. Census began counting same-sex households in 1990 and there are a number of concerns with its methodology. First, it requires individuals to self identify as living in a same sex household, meaning that those who choose not to be identified this way will not be counted. Moreover, the Census does not allow individuals to self-identify as gay or lesbian. Therefore, it significantly under counts gay and lesbian people in the U.S. Despite these limitations, the count of same-sex coupled households offers the best currently available measure of gays and lesbians living in the U.S.

² While I use the term "gay" here and throughout this project, it is used largely as a matter of convenience. Scholars generally agree that popular use of this term to reference a fixed, essential, socio-political identity is fundamentally a product of 20th century, Western society. It emerges as part of gay and lesbian activism beginning in the late 1950s through the early 1970s (see Adam 1995; Bernstein 2002; Chauncey 1994; Engel 2001; Epstein 1999; and Katz 2010, 2003). Moreover, I will discuss more extensively in Chapter II, contemporary approaches to the study of sexualities in sociology which take a decidedly constructionist view of sexualities. I embrace this theoretical framing of sexuality as socially constructed and fluid despite my use of the fixed term "gay."

³ By 1919, the upscale Rhode Island seaside resort town had become home to a WWI Naval training facility that housed over 25,000 sailors awaiting deployment (Loughery 1998; Murphy 1988). Among the various amusements that emerged catering to servicemen was an underground community of men (often referred to as the Ladies of Newport), who for love and money provided the sailors (and other military men) with sexual favors. When news of this activity reached Chief Machinist's Mate Ervin Arnold, he began documenting the local gossip about certain individuals, cruising spots (including the local Army Navy YMCA), and all-male parties where cross-dressing, sexual activity, liquor consumption and illicit drug use occurred. By spring, Arnold had gathered enough information to convince his superiors to authorize an investigation into "immoral conditions in Newport" (Loughery 1998:7). Arnold organized a group of undercover investigators -- specifically chosen for their youth and looks -- to infiltrate the subculture. Over the next several months, the operatives loitered at the YMCA, attended parties, made dates and submitted shockingly detailed reports on every individual they met, and each illegal or sexual act they engaged in. The arrest of sailors began in late spring; culminating in the court-martial of 17 sailors

references to Duke Hawkins, a "good looking negro" who was the counter waiter at the local Army Navy YMCA lunch room. Duke had taken a liking to a particular undercover military investigator with whom he flirted often. The operative, convinced that Hawkins could provide him with information on local cocaine distribution, took advantage of his affections and invited Hawkins out on several dates. The operative intended to use the encounters, where he would permit Hawkins' "amorous advances," to subtly inquire about the purchase of cocaine and hopefully entrap Hawkins into procuring the drug.⁴ As the dates continued, the drugs never did materialize; but the two did become increasingly physically intimate. Hawkins fell for the operative and during their time together, he would repeatedly ask the operative for his fidelity and silence about the relationship. Hawkins' pleas (on both counts) ultimately fell on deaf ears as the operative's intentions were not only untrue, but when the entire investigation came under scrutiny,⁵ the operative (and others) freely volunteered Hawkins' name and activities to the authorities with the hope of saving their own careers (Murphy 1988).

charged with sodomy and scandalous conduct (all of whom were sentenced to varying terms in the Naval Prison), two were dishonorably discharged and two who were found innocent. While the Navy considered the matter closed, Arnold urged his operatives to continue their investigations; and hounded those already in custody to name others. When the investigation resulted in the arrest and trial of revered, local, Episcopal, clergyman, Samuel Kent -- the Naval leadership and the press took notice. The public (who refused to believe in Kent's guilt), the local press and military leaders, shocked and outraged by the charges, turned on Arnold and his operatives. The presiding judge threw Kent's case out of court claiming that the operatives were no better than street walkers for having engaged in the kind of activity they did, which he felt made their testimony and own sexual affiliations, suspect. When Kent's trial was aborted, the Navy ended Arnold's investigations for good (For a more detailed account of the scandal, see Loughery (1998) or Murphy (1988).

⁴ The operative would promise Hawkins that he would become more physically intimate with him if they could "get high" together. He would then question him on whether he could provide this cocaine, and if so, who his source was (Murphy 1988).

⁵ See footnote n 2 which outlines the chronology of the Scandal.

Duke Hawkins' story is reminiscent of contemporary accounts of black gay men's lives. Hawkins is presented as a closeted gay man who engages in clandestine sexual encounters with other men. His race seems the most likely rationale for his suspected criminality,⁶ as he is one of several black men targeted by investigators for information about illicit drug use in Newport. The decision to target black men exclusively is noteworthy given that investigators' reports indicate that drug use was most commonly (if not exclusively) used by the white men who comprised the Ladies of Newport.⁷ Nonetheless, it is Hawkins who is offered up as "the" social deviant responsible for Newport's troubles and his classification as such definitely relied upon his subordinated social statuses as both a black and a gay man. The fact that Hawkins is demonized in this way is undoubtedly the result of the white investigators who authored it. Operating from a racial frame that construes blacks and gays as subordinate to white heterosexual men it is not surprising that Hawkins is targeted and scapegoated by the authorities. While I wish to return to this idea below, it is important to point out that such depictions of black gay men tend to rely on a number of prominent, structural arrangements – white supremacy, heteronormativity, black respectability, and gay identity – that constitute homosexuality as immoral, blackness as deviant, and black homosexuality as a white-influenced pathology that is nonetheless silent about the normative whiteness inherent to

⁶ Despite the fact that cocaine was once a popularly used drug in America, U.S. anti-drug laws proliferated at the turn of the 20th century in larger part due to media campaigns that associated the rape of white women, violent crime, and black depravity with their use of cocaine (U.S. contractors frequently gave cocaine to their Black employees to get more work out of them.). These accounts motivated Southern members of Congress to support the Harrison Narcotics Act which greatly expanded the federal government's power to control drugs (Courtwright 2001; Musto 1999).

⁷ Murphy (1988) relates that the reports show that one of the Ladies is able to procure cocaine from a black male cook at the YMCA. But this is the only documented instance of drug purchase. There are more frequent references to the use of drugs and alcohol by gay white men.

mainstream gay identity (Collins 2004; Crawford et al. 2002; Reid-Pharr 2001; Riggs 1991). As a result, contemporary depictions of black gay men in the social sciences, local and national periodicals, television talk shows and dramas, and popular press books bear remarkable resemblance to the Hawkins story, and continue to characterize them as inauthentically black, conflicted about their identities, ashamed to live openly, engaged in clandestine sexual encounters with men while having heterosexual relationships, and responsible for the spread of HIV to heterosexual, Black women – an idea that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention argues has never been supported by empirical evidence.⁸

What data we do have on black gay men indicates that these portrayals have a tangible and negative impact on their lives and experiences (e.g. Clarke 1999; Herek & Capitanio 1995; Icard 1996; Loiacano 1993; Wilson & Miller 2002; and Summers 2004). Thus these narratives comprise an essential element of social life that is ripe material for research. They not only offer insight into the structural arrangements, social interactions, and cultural meaning systems that produce categories of black gay male identity, but help organize its place within the social hierarchy. Moreover, these narratives provide the foundation upon which black gay men build the counter narratives they construct in response to dominant, negative portrayals of themselves. Therefore it is useful to briefly review some of the most pervasive of these stories in order to understand their negative impact on black gay men.

⁸ See “Questions and answers: Men on the down low.” at CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/resources/qa/downlow.htm>.

ON THE DOWN LOW (DL): POPULAR DISCOURSES OF THE BLACK (GAY) MALE PREDATOR

While the "Down Low" or "DL" is a slippery term with a complicated history (Boykin 2005; Phillips 2005), it tends to refer to black men who "secretly have sex with other men while maintaining heterosexual relationships with women and presenting themselves as masculine rather than effeminate" (Phillips 2005:4). Gonzalez (2007) adds that the brand of masculinity usually associated with the DL is definitively urban, reflective of hip hop culture, and dangerously hypermasculine or "thuggish." The now familiar storyline of "the black man on the dl" can be said to have first achieved national attention in the summer of 2003 when white journalist Benoit Denizet-Lewis authored a piece on the DL for the *New York Times Magazine*. While not the first to write about the DL,⁹ his status (both as a white outsider and writer for the *New York Times*), tone, and approach to the topic (suggesting his "findings" were the result of rigorous investigation) evidence not only his dependence on existing ideologies of race, sexuality and disease, but afforded him the necessary credibility to have an enormous impact on the national discussion about race, sexuality and HIV infection.

Denizet-Lewis (2003) opens with bold claims about the DL being more than a pattern of chosen sexual behavior by some men, but an organized subculture with it's

⁹ Boykin (2005) suggests that public discussion of the DL probably began as early as 2000 when the CDC published a report speculating that increases in the rate of HIV infection among heterosexual black women could potentially be attributed to what was then called a "bisexual bridge." Boykin further documents that the idea begins to appear in the mainstream media as early as February 2001 (see Boykin 2005:90, 99 and 102-104). So while Denizet-Lewis was not the first to discuss this phenomenon, he may have helped to bring it to national attention given that he had a national platform, used an investigatory approach (since he was an outsider to this community) and related personal accounts of sexual behavior.

own "vocabulary and customs" (p. 30). His tone consistently expresses concern for both the pervasive nature of the DL phenomenon (citing both the number of places and venues in which he found DL activity), as well as the clandestine and unsafe practices he says are common to DL sex. He concludes, with the aid of selected quotes from various public health officials, that the DL poses a significant health risk to heterosexual, black women. But it is his categorical assertion that the DL is an exclusively black phenomenon (citing for example, that DL men tend not to have racially exogenous sexual partners and that many venues catering to a DL clientele actively bar whites from entry) whose existence is uniquely attributable to inflexible black cultural and gender norms, that most directly connects the DL narrative to historically racist claims of black sexual deviance and black male pathology; and to more recent public fears about gay sexuality and the spread of HIV. Thus Denizet-Lewis' work greatly contributed to the racialization of the DL ideal; formalized its juxtaposition with black male homosexuality and reveal the white racial framing¹⁰ of the author.

Within two years of the Denizet-Lewis article "the DL," and its intrinsic archetype of the black male predator, this characterization became a commonplace narrative in popular culture. This is best epitomized by the appearance of the DL on the Oprah Winfrey Show in the spring of 2004 (Harpo Productions, Inc. 2004). Devoting an entire show to a discussion of the phenomenon, Oprah's featured guest was J. L. King, author of a book about the Down Low and self-proclaimed "former DL" man. The

¹⁰ Feagin (2009) defines white racial framing as an "overarching worldview that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations" that are animated by narratives, characters and plotlines of white superiority and black inferiority which guide individual action (p. 3).

segment sensationalized the DL issue, as the host frequently invited the audience to share her shock, concern, and fear about the sudden and pervasive nature of the DL and its potential danger to black women. Through her commentary and questioning of guests, Oprah framed men on the DL as secretive, in denial about their true sexuality, and most likely HIV infected because they ignore public health messages to engage in safe sexual practices -- that is when she was not congratulating King for having the courage to "come out" about this issue because of its potential benefit to black women's health. Given the show's (and host's) credibility, and reported daily viewership of between 7 and 9 million (comprised mostly of middle-aged women, many of whom are African American¹¹), Oprah possibly gave the DL its largest and most mainstream audience to date. Since then, the DL has appeared virtually everywhere -- popular press books, nationally syndicated television shows, urban music lyrics, and social science research (see n8; Boykin 2002, 2005; Freeman 2006; J. King 2003; J. L. King 2005; Kregloe 2006).

Boykin (2005) notes that DL discourses emerged in a perfect storm of cultural and social forces. The public conversation came into being at a time when HIV infection rates among blacks (particularly black women) were alarmingly high (greater than their proportion to the population) and the DL appeared to offer not only a plausible explanation for this trend, but also a convenient scapegoat for the enormous impact the

¹¹ For Oprah Show demographics, see "Breaking Down Oprah's Numbers" at msnbc.com (<http://firstread.msnbc.msn.com/news/2007/12/07/4425062-breaking-down-oprahs-numbers/>); "Oprah Winfrey to End Her Talk Show" at the New York Times blog (<http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/19/oprah-winfrey-to-end-her-talk-show/>); and "Oprah Winfrey: The TV Queen's Crown Slips" at the London Sunday Times on line (http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/tv_and_radio/article4021213.ece).

disease, long associated with gays and drug addicts, was having on a group of "innocent" victims (black women, children and families). Moreover, the term itself had in fact originated within urban black culture as a perfunctory label for heterosexual infidelity making it easy to associate with black (gay) men. But Phillips (2005) suggests that it was the media attention given to the term, and particularly to J.L. King's book, *On the Down Low*, that gave the concept authenticity and a national platform.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of the discourse, the credibility of its sources, and the plausibility of its claims, the narrative juxtaposition of DL behavior with black male homosexuality is based on dubious assumptions. Laud Humphrey's well known study of homosexual sex in public bathrooms, firmly established that clandestine sexual encounters among men who would otherwise identify as heterosexual is not a "black thing." As Phillips (2005) correctly points out, the majority of Humphrey's participants were middle class, married white men. Gonzalez (2007) documents down low behavior among Latino men. Saleh and Operario (2009) also reference studies documenting DL behavior among Latino, Asian and Hispanic men. Phillips (2005) has identified several studies in which down low behavior among women was found to exist, and the CDC has publicly declared that claims that the DL is responsible for the spread of HIV have no empirical basis. Nonetheless, as Phillips (2005) points out, the DL has become a principle narrative by which black men are evaluated both broadly and within black communities. The slightest degree of gender non-conforming behavior, or even the suspicion of homosexual activity can elicit such animosity and fear that many claim has only exacerbated if not transformed existing homophobia in black communities; and

fractured the potential for racial solidarity at all levels. As a result black (gay) men exist at the social and political margins of not only society, but also of the very black communities in which they reside (Battle, Bennett & Shaw 2004; Cahill 2010; Cohen 1999; hooks 2001; Phillips 2005).

MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN: SCHOLARLY EUPHEMISMS OF THE BLACK (GAY) MALE PREDATOR

Arguably, the DL narrative of black gay men's lives is closely paralleled in public health literature. That literature, particularly that which has focused on HIV prevention and epidemiology, has since the early 1990s used the behavioral category, "men who have sex with men" or "MSM" as an identity-free term in empirical research. Young and Meyer (2005) explain that the term was coined (and used more frequently than its complementary term, WSW – or women who have sex with women) as a way to conveniently conduct research on sexual behavior while avoiding the complexities of self-labeling. The thinking among biomedical researchers at the time was that identities had "little to with [the] epidemiological investigation of diseases . . . [as] behaviors, not identities, place individuals at risk for HIV infection," (p. 1144). Scholars reasoned that because early medical claims associated HIV infection with certain social groups (most notably gay men), which only further stigmatized already marginalized groups and complicated public health efforts to reduce infections, the avoidance of identity terms in empirical research would have practical and social value. Researchers were also

increasingly influenced by the growing prominence of queer theory and gay and lesbian scholarship which took a more constructionist view of sexuality. Accordingly, biomedical researchers came to agree that sexualities were in fact "products of social processes . . . [and thus] sexual practices cannot be interpreted as though they carry fixed meanings" which pushed scholars to call for more empirical research that took a more complex and nuanced understanding of sexual identities, behaviors and desires (Young & Meyer 2005:1144).

Despite the potential benefits of this change in paradigm, scholars have begun to suggest that MSM has failed to produce the more nuanced and complex empirical work it was intended to generate. Instead, they have found the pervasive use of the concept to draw scholarly attention away from structural factors that shape sexual behavior, and to undermine participants' agentic claims to sexual identity – particularly when applied to people of color (Young & Meyer, 2005:1144); and to frame its subjects' sexual behavior in largely pathological terms. The consequences of this are perhaps best demonstrated by a sampling of scholarly work utilizing the MSM approach from a variety of journals. Almost universally applied to men of color (particularly black and Latino men), this body of work tends to consider its subjects as heavily engaged in unsafe sexual behaviors (Malebranche et al. 2009; Peterson et al. 2009; Wheeler et al. 2008; Wilton et al. 2005; Wilton et al. 2009); illicit drug and sexual activity (Wheeler et al. 2008; Wilton et al. 2005); promiscuous sex (Wilton et al. 2009); and/or unlikely to generally disclose their homosexual activities (Icard 2008; Wheeler et al. 2008).

While it is evident that the intent of this literature has been to both explain and

prevent the disproportionate occurrence of HIV infection among black men, the frequent discursive linkage of black male homosexuality with the characteristics listed above, constructs an overall narrative that is remarkably consistent with the down low accounts. The resulting, albeit implied, message that black MSMs are highly correlated with unsafe sexual practices; which due to their complicated sexual identities place both men and women at risk for STDs and HIV infection is without a doubt an extension of the DL archetype. The specific array of traits and behaviors noted above facilitate the portrayal of black MSMs as immoral, dangerous and threatening; and reinforces the idea of black gay men as predators. Moreover, in failing to conceptualize risk factors or behaviors in structural terms or to take more complex views of sexual identity, these accounts fail to consider how individual sexual behaviors are individually and interactively shaped and interpreted via existing racial, sexual, gender and class hierarchies. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the conceptual parallels between the DL and MSM is Saleh and Operario's (2009) critique, not of the MSM paradigm but of the use of the DL concept in public health research, which makes the identical claim that use of the DL concept in research has tended to "stigmatize and exoticize secretive same-sex sexuality as a unique issue among African American men; and ignore the social conditions under which HIV transmission occurs" (p. 390).

PUNKS AND FAGGOTS: POPULAR DISCOURSES OF WASTED MANHOOD AND RACIAL INAUTHENTICITY

Post-Civil Rights transformations in American racism from overt expressions to more colorblind and systemic formations,¹² appear to have amplified the importance and role of black masculinity for black communities (Collins 2004; Phillips, 2005). While appeals to respectable black manhood have always been a feature of black resistance to white racism, since the late 60s/early 70s, hypermasculine and hyper-heterosexual archetypes of black manhood such as black macho, the thug, the pimp, and the playa have become increasingly convenient, popular discourses for articulating racial empowerment and resistance to "high-tech, neo-racist assaults on Black men (such as the prison-industrial complex, the increasingly disenfranchising educational and economic systems, and dehumanizing mass media imagery) (Phillips 2005). Such representations generate strong discursive links between a political rhetoric aimed at overall black social progress and the strength, social efficacy and potency of black manhood. Moreover, these claims assert black manhood as better, and more masculine than its white counterpart which is thought to regard an empowered black masculinity as threatening to the racial hierarchy. Drawing on white fears, and the historical resilience of black communities to white racism, black manhood (and the stronger the better) is literally and rhetorically construed as the critical tool in challenging white supremacy and enabling black social progress (Ongiri 1997; Phillips 2005; Welsing 1991). For individual black

¹² See Feagin (2001), Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Bonilla-Silva (2003).

men then, solidarity with community values and commitment to racial progress signal the successful performance of empowered masculinity – with the most exaggerated performances of strength, virility and success being ideal – particularly when these traits are mobilized in the production of healthy and productive black families, and communities.

In this context, homosexuality is considered exogenous to the black experience, a vestige of whites' encounter with blacks, disruptive to black social progress, destabilizing to the black family, and implies complicity with the “white genocidal plot” (Ongiri 1997; Riggs 1991; Welsing 1991). As a result, gay and bisexual black men are seen as not only as inauthentic men, but as inauthentically black – as homosexual behavior (particularly if one were open about it) is seen as a complete capitulation to whiteness (Collins 2004). Thus it is not uncommon for these “failed” black men, to be referred to as “punks” and “faggots” within black communities. Riggs (1991) noted that the faggot, was simply an extension of the racist image of the “sambo” or “coon,” which symbolized docile and emasculated Black manhood. Hence, as Collins (2004) observed, in black popular culture the faggot is frequently invoked as a source of humor and comedy. The “faggot” operates as an internal other, and as the “baseline transgression beyond which a Black man is no longer a man” (Riggs 1991:390). Discursively, Riggs (1991) suggests, the faggot is meant to represent “weakness, passivity, the absence of real guts – balls” (p. 390). Similarly the punk, while comparable to the faggot, portrays a conquered masculinity that has completely given itself over to whiteness (Collins 2004).

Thus within many black communities, male homosexuality has come to

represent, not simply an alternative category of sexual identity, but an undermining of black masculinity and by extension, black social progress. Black gay men's association with emasculation and femininity frames it as a form of weakness that is insufficient for the task of challenging white supremacy, or securing socio-economic progress for black families and communities.

THE CONFLICTED BLACK GAY MAN: ACADEMIC DISCOURSES OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

The social science literature on black gays and lesbians has tended to describe their lives as ones of constant struggle. Encompassing largely psychosocial accounts, the literature characterizes the turmoil of black gay lives as resulting from constant negotiations of homophobia in black communities, racism within gay communities, as well as racism and homophobia/heterosexism within the larger society. The ability to accomplish a social identity is claimed to be further complicated by the dearth of black, gay role models, or social spaces where the integration of racialized sexualities are possible and affirmed. The absence of social scripts which offer realistic performative options for transgressing the inherent limitations of traditional conceptualizations of race, sexuality and gender is also noted as a source of identity conflicts. These accounts of the existential crisis experienced by black gay men (and women), tend to be grounded in psychosocial theories of identity which seek to extend the work of Erikson (1963) – whose theories of personality asserted that healthy human development required the

resolution of one's identity in a variety of social categories -- by specifying the processes by which gender, sexual orientation and racial identities are constructed (Adams 1997; Helms 1994).

Typical of this body of work would be Loiacano's (1993) exploratory study of black gay and lesbian identity. Based upon six (three men and three women) open-ended interviews, Loiacano (1993) claimed to identify a pattern of frequent encounters with racism in white, gay communities; homophobia in black communities; and a unfulfilled need for validation in both communities. This produced an overall life experience marked by the effort to resolve these tensions, thus making it difficult for black gays and lesbians to develop a positive self identity. In another study, Wilson and Miller (2002) claimed that black gay and bisexual men encounter a plethora of race and sexuality related stressors in their efforts to construct a positive self image. As a result, who they become was largely a reflection of the strategies they employed to cope with these phenomenon. While Wilson and Miller (2002) implied that the potential for a positive self image lie in the individual's effective integration of these conflicting identities, Icard (1986) described black gay men as innately conflicted over their identities due to frequent and simultaneous encounters with black homophobia and white gay racism. Suggesting that these communities were inherently antagonistic, Icard (1986) claimed that black gay men were "placed psychologically in a position of triple jeopardy. The formation and maintenance of his self-concept is threatened by society at large, the black community and the gay community" (Icard 1986:91). Unable to develop a positive and integrated sense of self, he claimed that black gay men developed poor coping strategies,

poor self image, and self presentations that largely conformed to the worst gay and/or racial stereotypes. Crawford, Allison, Zamboni & Soto's (2002) study to understand the higher prevalence of poor psychological and social adjustment among black, gay men concluded that only those black gay men who were positively self-identified as both black and gay possessed high levels of self esteem, HIV prevention skills, stronger support networks, greater life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress; and that such integration was possible provided that traditional notions of black manhood and black sexuality could be expanded to encompass black homosexual manhood. Absent this option for most black gay men, the authors note that men who held strong racial identities reported higher levels of life satisfaction; implying that the most realistic option for black gay men to be happy, is to choose to emphasize their racial identity over their sexuality. Green's (2007a) life history interviews with 30 black, gay men in New York City also described an unresolved pattern of conflict over their race and sexual identities brought on by their associations with both racial and gay institutions. Pushed out of black communities over issues of sexual orientation, and unable to fully integrate within gay communities due to racial matters, Green (2007a) reports that his narrators "found themselves on the horns of a dilemma, alienated from black community institutions because of their sexuality but less integrated into white, urban, gay community institutions because of their race" (p. 754). As a result, he found them to make choices and adaptations that were not always of their own choosing, but were shaped by black and then gay social institutions.¹³

¹³ It should be noted that Green's work is unique among this collection of "existential crisis" scholarship in

Collectively, this body of work constructs a narrative of black gay men (and lesbians) as having conflicted and fractured identities. Unable to find peace, affirmation or empowerment in their social identities as a result of sexual selves that compete with racial selves, they are said to suffer the burden of having to choose a salient identity and therefore opt for inclusion within one community or the other. In positing such a bleak view of black gay life, the literature implies that there are few, if any, productive alternatives to the otherwise grim fate that awaits those seeking to construct their social identity utilizing organizing structures of race and sexuality. Such a perspective would seem to overemphasize the social arrangements that shape black gay men's lives, while either missing or underestimating the capacity for individual agency or resistance. As a result, the social science literature in attempting to capture the complexities and challenges posed by current discourses, expressions and performances of race and sexuality has appeared to instead characterize black gay men only as tragic figures and organize black, gay identity as highly problematic.

IN SEARCH OF A NEW NARRATIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

While there are a number of existing social narratives about black gay men, they fail to provide us with more than the most limited account of black gay life for three prominent reasons. First, in light of the overwhelmingly pathological nature of their portrayals of black gay men, these narratives seem invested in social projects that have

that he is the only sociologists, and therefore the only to frame the tensions of black, gay men's identity within structural forces as opposed to necessary cognitive/interpretive ones.

little to do with the black gay men they describe. Second (and related to the first), these stories collectively provide relatively uncomplicated analyses of race and sexuality; framing them as competing social structures for organizing social life and personal identity. In failing to consider race and sexuality as intersecting matrices of oppression, empowerment and existence, these accounts tell us little, if anything, about the agentic choices made by black gay men to internalize, resist, or creatively negotiate these structures in their everyday lives. Third, there is a tendency in this work to under-theorize race. Race is framed either as an interpretive framework, or a cultural production, but not as a material and systemic and hierarchical structure – particularly as it relates the maintenance of white supremacy. This significantly de-contextualizes the social actor, forcing us to miss much of what may be the unique motivational, interpretative and structural dimensions by which race shapes sexuality in the lives/experiences of gay people of color. Accordingly, it is easy to understand why we continue to have so little empirical insight into the lived experiences of black gay men.

In contrast to these accounts which provide only a crude, dominant take on their black gay male subjects, this project “looks to the bottom” and affords its black gay male subjects the space to become “organic intellectuals” (Matsuda 1987) who provide their own self-authored narrative of what it means to be black and gay in America. Again, my goal is to use their voices to substantially illuminate that experience, and how it is interactively shaped by existing hierarchies of race, sexuality and gender. Thus unlike prior work, this project brings a decidedly intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1989) to the empirical study of black gay men’s lives which emphasizes not only the

multidimensionality (structural, cultural and lived experience) of intersecting social categories of race and sexuality (and ultimately gender and class), but in so doing, brings racial dynamics into sharper focus. Moreover this project seeks to fill a gap that has been identified by scholars as the need for more empirical work on sexualities that takes a simultaneous look at race, class, gender and sexuality intersections (Crawley & Broad 2008; Plummer 1995; Green 2002, 2007b). In examining the stories black gay men tell about themselves, this study provides the opportunity to better understand the multiple structural arrangements, social interactions, and cultural meaning systems that produce categories of black gay male identity and organize its place within the social hierarchy.

To accomplish this, I take a sociological approach to the analysis of narrative. Such approaches see stories as an essential element of social life that is ripe material for empirical research. As an item of data “narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world that are flattened or silenced by . . . more traditional methods of social science . . . [as] social identities and social action, indeed all aspects of the social world, are storied” (Ewick & Silbey 1995:199). While scholars who examine stories for insight into social phenomena describe a variety of analytical approaches, I am guided by Plummer’s (1995) work in developing four critical research questions regarding the narratives gathered for this project:

1. **What do these stories tell us about the experience of being black and gay in America?** Much of what is known about being a black gay man in America comes from sources other than black gay men themselves. In fact, some of the most prominent cultural narratives are decidedly negative. As a result, the

existing accounts are overwhelmingly one dimensional and limited in their insights. Allowing black gay men to speak for themselves and in their own voices has much potential for expanding our understanding of their lived experience and the intersectional functioning of race, gender and sexuality hierarchies.

2. **What social structures are implicated in the production of contemporary narratives told by black gay men about their lived experience?** In exploring this question, I wish to illuminate the complex relationship that exists between local, everyday behaviors and the structural features that shape them. Specifically, I wish to understand how existing hierarchies of race, sexuality, and gender regulate how and in what way black gay men's stories are told such that they either enable (or limit) the identity work of black gay men. As an intersectional project, the answer to this question must look beyond the independent functioning of these structures, and also explore how they operate interactively.
3. **What social project is accomplished by the contemporary stories told by black gay men?** All stories either reify or challenge existing social arrangements (Aguirre 2000; Ewick & Silbey 1995; Matsuda 1987; Plummer 1995). As such, this project examines how the stories related here are meant to function as social phenomena. In particular, specifying the intended audience(s) for these accounts, and the social commentary they provide about race, gender and sexuality –

independently and interactively – will illuminate the particular role these stories are meant to play in social life.

4. **How is the story that these men tell shaped by this particular socio-historical moment?** As Plummer (1995) suggests, stories are cultural products shaped by the particular historical moment in which they emerge, and are illustrative of the particular needs and resource opportunities of that period. In terms of race, the current era has been framed by scholars as post-industrial (Wilson 2009), color blind (Bonilla-Silva 2003), and since the election of Barak Obama, post racial (Wingfield-Harvey & Feagin 2009). Moreover, in terms of sexuality, the current era has been defined by politics of queer identity/theory (Gamson & Moon 2004; Stein & Plummer 1994), cultural visibility (Vaid 1995) and AIDS/HIV (Cohen 1999). Examining how these (or other) social phenomena have shaped or enabled the stories told by these men, will enrich our understanding of how stories function and are socially produced.

With these questions in mind, I turn to an overview of current thinking and scholarship about black gay men in order to situate this project within the broader academic literatures on race and sexuality. To accomplish this, in the next chapter I provide an overview of how critical race sociologists think about sexuality, and how scholars of sexuality think about race. In reviewing these literatures, I emphasize what it is I think each does well, what I believe they miss, and describe how this project attempts to address those limitations. As part of that discussion, I include a brief discussion of intersectionality theory and its applications to the study of

narrative. In those sections, I highlight in greater detail what a sociology of stories is all about, how it has been applied to the study of race and sexuality, and how some intersectional scholars see narrative work as the best vehicle for conducting complex analyses of interlocking systems of oppression at both the structural and interpersonal levels. I close with an illustration of this recommendation that relates the historical, narrative construction of black gay men. In examining the production of those stories, I emphasize how interlocking systems of race, gender and sexuality have produced not only the daily lives of black gay men, but have assisted or challenged existing structural arrangements of race and sexuality.

CHAPTER II

THEORIZING BLACK GAY MEN

Examining the lived experience of black gay men and the stories they tell, required more than one theoretical framework to adequately situate this project. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the various perspectives used, and map out their respective contributions to this work. I begin with a discussion of current debates in theorizing race and describe why critical structural perspectives provide the best basis for thinking about black gay men's experiences. Second, I address the tensions between social constructionist and queer theoretical perspectives in sexualities scholarship and explain my preference for the use of a constructionist framework in this project. Next, I describe theories of intersectionality in order to guide a simultaneous analysis of race and sexuality, as well as bridge what would otherwise be two incompatible approaches for thinking about social life. Here I discuss the complications of bringing structural perspectives of race together with constructionist approaches to sexuality, and why intersectionality offers a useful solution for this challenge. Finally, I close this chapter with a detailed discussion of sociological approaches to narrative analysis. As the analysis of stories provides the critical framework for this project, I spend ample time describing what a sociology of stories is all about, and include how it effectively juxtaposes structural and interpretive dynamics in a way that allows new insights and theorizations of the intersection of race and sexuality.

THEORIZING RACE

Sociologists have developed numerous theories to describe the nature and development of race in America. While it is generally agreed that race is a social construction with no basis in biology, scholars continue to debate about whether race can ideally be conceptualized as a structural phenomenon or as a patterned process of cultural production. Scholars who see race as a cultural product seek to explain the microprocesses by which individuals, collectivities and even institutions create, interpret and regularly negotiate racial meaning. Cornell and Hartman (2007) situate this scholarship within the symbolic interactionist or constructionist school of sociological thought which engenders a view of race as interactively-constructed.¹⁴ Through these interactions, groups and individuals regularly negotiate externally imposed racial constructions alongside their own agentic choices at self definition. As a result, the constellation of racial meanings and identities are said to be “built, rebuilt and sometimes dismantled over time” (p. 75). In this process groups also come to identify shared interests, culture and institutions, and establish criteria that operate as symbolic boundaries for who “authentically” belongs. Under these circumstances, scholars argue that racial meanings and identities are inherently unstable and fluid because they respond to historical and cultural forces such as sudden and gradual transformations in the cultural, legal and economic implications of race, and adjustments in group interests. Lamont (1999) best exemplifies the contributions of cultural sociologists (and others

¹⁴ See also Berbrier (2008) for a more in-depth overview of constructionist approaches to race.

who use culture to explain racial phenomenon) in theorizing race, suggesting that racial distinctions are the product of social scripts that create publically available categories of identity, organize inter-group relations, and establish group placement within the social hierarchy. Attempting to bridge the culture/structure divide in race scholarship, she asserts that racial scripts are “systemic, structural properties of the environment” (p. xi). As a structural element, scripts produce patterns of interpretive practice that not only organize self and collective definition, but regulate how different collectivities are meant to relate to one another in everyday life. Nagel (1994) has extended the structural dimension of constructionist scholarship in work that suggests that while there are historical and circumstantial variations in racial identities and meanings, the relatively unyielding nature of racial inequality in America tends to more narrowly constrain the choice of available scripts for some groups more than others. Both informal (e.g. racial stereotypes), and formal (governments, political policies, and institutional practices) social structures participate in defining and policing these categories. As a result, she claims, these structural arrangements produce distinctly different racial experiences for different racial groups. Omi and Winant (1994) could arguably be said to have matured the constructionist approach on race through their work on racial formations. Arguing that race is a “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 55), the authors see the state as the principle site where contests over racial meaning, power, status and resources take place. Through the apparatus of the state, race-based meaning systems, symbols and interpretive frames are transformed into structures of domination (e.g. law, public policy and institutional

practices). Thus Omi and Winant (1999) see the history of race in America as a series of ever-changing definitions, manifestations and dynamics in the nature and content of group race relations. They assert that despite this, there is a perceptible trend towards improved race relations that is best exemplified in the overall transformation from a condition of racial dictatorship in America, where a single set of racial meanings and statuses were forcefully imposed, to the current racial democracy where on-going racial contests produce episodes of hegemonic control and collaboration.

Influenced by Marxist thought, more critical perspectives on race (e.g. Bell 1992; Bonilla-Silva 1997, 1999; Feagin 2000, 2006) use a structural lens to understand racial phenomenon and criticize the constructionist paradigm for its incompleteness in at least three fundamental ways. First, they argue that constructionist paradigms tend to incorrectly conceptualize society's racial groups as equal contenders in the political and social contests over racial meanings, resources, power and status; when in fact the rigid and continuing stratification of American society by racial status proves this basic assumption to be patently untrue (Feagin 2006). Second, scholars claim that constructionist approaches tend to over-emphasize the ideological nature of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Framing racial phenomena as free-wheeling cultural products is said to incorrectly assert that race/racism are in fact dependent on other, neutral (i.e. inherently non-racist) social structures to become manifest. Third, scholars claim that while constructionist approaches talk a great deal about race, they fail to provide robust explanations for the continued existence and operation of racism and white supremacy and tend to narrowly construe racism as a taken for granted product of

social attitudes, prejudices and behaviors (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

In contrast to these assumptions, structural scholars see race and particularly racism as a systemic, foundational and pervasive system created and maintained by and for the benefit of whites' social, political, and economic interests (Bell 1992; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2000, 2006). This system of white advantage is described as a historical feature of American society, in that categories of race and their corresponding social statuses were developed early in the colonial period by white elites to serve their narrow worldview and economic interests, and were then embedded into the nation's founding documents and institutions (Feagin 2000; Roediger 2007; Smedley 1999; Takaki 2000). Thus structural theorists charge that America is at its core hierarchically organized by race; resulting in a patently asymmetrical system of white supremacy that pervades every aspect of civil society (Bell 1992; Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 1997, 1999; Carmichael & Hamilton 1992; Feagin 2000, 2006). Comprehending the nature and operation of this system, scholars contend, requires understanding racism from the perspective of those at the bottom of the hierarchy whose oppressed status affords them valuable information about the workings of racialized society and the maintenance of white privilege generally obscured from, unknown to, or ignored by those of dominant racial status (Delgado 1990; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Matsuda 1987). Privileging this knowledge has led scholars to determine that the structural apparatus of systemic racism has included (1) the exploitative and discriminatory practices of whites; (2) the unjust enrichment of whites (and corresponding impoverishment of others) through theft and exploitation of the labor, power and resources of competing racial groups; (3) the

ongoing preservation, by formal and informal means, of substantial inequalities in power and resources through white-control of all major social institutions and; (4) a vast array of racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations that contribute to a white racial framing of social life in order to create a compelling cover story for racial oppression. These narratives construct whites as innocent and people of color as deserving, personally responsible or naturally suited to the outcomes of racial inequality (Feagin 2000, 2006, 2009). Scholars have also noted in the post-civil rights era, increasingly subtle forms of racist discourse that include narratives, scripts, explanations and rhetorical strategies that support the erasure of racial claims and allow whites to see contemporary America as being post-race, with racial equality having already been fundamentally achieved (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Generally, the structural literature emphasizes broader racial matters like remuneration, access, status, power and equity (Bonilla-Silva 1997:469) and has led scholars to take a more essentialist view of their subjects. Blacks and whites, for example, are conceptualized as real and concrete social collectivities with divergent, if not competing, social interests (Bonilla-Silva 1999). At the macro level, race scholars seek to explicate the mechanics by which the systemic nature of race/racism is created and maintained (Haney Lopez 2006; Harris 1993; Moore 2008; Royster 2003; Russell 1998; Shapiro 2006; Wilson 1980a, 1980b, 1997), while at the micro-level the material consequences of these distinctions are ascertained and documented (e.g. Bolton & Feagin 2004; Houts-Picca & Feagin 2007; Feagin & McKinney 2003; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Mueller, Dirks & Houts-Picca 2007; Newman 2000; Patillo 2007).

While both bodies of theory have provided meaningful insights on race, in this project I employ a decidedly structural view of U.S. racial phenomenon. By this I mean that I interpret the narratives of black gay men occurring within the historical, foundational and pervasive system of race that has organized hierarchical social relations, privileged whiteness at the expense of other racial categories (but especially blackness), and permeated all societal institutions, generating material social, political, economic, and educational inequities. As it relates to this work, I acknowledge that the system of white supremacy has produced statuses and ideologies of blackness that culturally and materially impact the lives of black gay men. I pay particular attention to the white racial framing of black manhood and heterosexuality that cooperatively generate the marginalization of black gay men both broadly and within black communities. As a result, I see within their identity work – particularly in counternarratives of black manhood and religious reconciliation – as a patterned process of resistance.

In an effort to fully explain the theoretical lenses I bring to this work, I want to next theoretically frame the territory of sexualities scholarship and describe the insights that literature brings to this project.

THEORIZING SEXUALITY

Sociological approaches to the study of sexuality are, in many ways, far more complex and varied in their origins and intentions. The field tends to be more

interdisciplinary with theoretical perspectives and paradigms regularly borrowed from gender, feminist, gay and lesbian, and women's studies; poststructuralist theory (deconstruction in particular); symbolic interactionist thought; and both social science and humanities-based approaches. Yet despite this, the field does manage to coalesce within two broad approaches – constructionist theories and queer theory – that share a great deal of intellectual territory. Given this, I have several goals in discussing these two theoretical paradigms in sociological approaches to sexualities. First, I hope to explain their relative contributions to thinking about sexualities in a way that focuses both on areas of overlap, as well as the differences in how they theorize sexuality. Second, I wish to briefly describe the current approaches to the study of sexualities which scholars regard as bridging some of the critical differences in these theoretical approaches. Third, I want to outline the theoretical approach to sexualities I bring to this particular project.

In choosing to restrict this discussion to constructionist and queer theoretical approaches to the study of sexuality, I do not mean to suggest that there are no alternative theorizations in the literature. In fact there are, among others, approaches that rely on Marxist theory (Greenberg & Bystryn 1996), theories of the state (Canaday 2009), and theories of globalization (Altman 2002), but constructionist and queer theoretical approaches tend to dominate the literature – specifically when discussing identities – and so it seems appropriate that I focus this discussion on these two paradigms. I will begin with outlining queer theory. Although it is the most recent theoretical contribution of the two, and in many ways contemplated as a challenge to

constructionist work, critiques of queer theory have anchored contemporary constructionist scholarship on sexualities. Thus queer theory seems an appropriate place to begin this overview.

Queer theory derives from the deconstruction school of post-structuralist thought, and is heavily influenced by Foucault's writings on the genealogy of sexuality in western society. Foucault's ([1978] 1990, [1984] 1990) fundamental premise was that sexual identities are a relatively recent phenomenon in western culture, and cannot be construed as a fixed and natural state of being. Instead, he argued that sexualities be conceptualized as historically contingent and discursive formations. Foucault considered the construction of human sexualities to be organized by discourses – or sophisticated and privileged systems of power and knowledge – which are embedded in the roles and institutions of society. There, they facilitate categories of “normal” and “deviant” sexuality; and function as a form of social control. As a result, queer theorists are largely concerned with contesting the notion of fixed categories of gender and sexuality; and are aggressively critical of grand theories promoting the idea of a stable social order (Crawley & Broad 2008; Gamson 2000; Green 2007b; Plummer 2003; Stein & Plummer 1994). Instead, scholars aim to examine society's normalizing forces in order to reveal the relations of power they innately privilege (Epstein 1996; Seidman 2006).

Butler (1990) claimed that one of these normalizing forces was the social artifice of a mutually constructing, and linear relationship between gendered bodies, sexuality, and gender performance. The consequence of this arrangement, she claimed, was the regular privileging of heterosexual relationships as the “normal” consequence of that

binary gender schema. Through an organized system of rewards and punishments, this structure of heteronormativity systemically forces compliance to heterosexual norms, and organizes all social life. Scholars note (e.g. Gamson & Moon 2004; Stein and Plummer 1994) that as a result, queer theorists see heteronormativity everywhere, and exposing its operation and social control functions are a recurring theme of queer theoretical work. Scholars find less value in understanding homosexuality, but find in the examination of how the gay/straight binary organizes sexual identities (particularly the non-normative), and social institutions (e.g. the economy); the opportunity to gain deeper insight into the nature and workings of compulsory heterosexuality (Seidman 2006).

It is this basic suspicion of heteronormativity that leads queer theory scholars to question sexual identity as a coherent and objective phenomenon (Crawley & Broad 2008, Gamson & Moon 2004; Seidman 2006; Stein & Plummer 1994). Instead, they see identities as contested, fractured, inconsistent, fragmented and falsely constrained by a system of compulsory heterosexuality. As a result of the specious choices forced by the system, the multiple and complex dimensions of identity are generally obscured. Thus categories are seen as constraints, as artifacts of assimilationist impulses, or as academic and social conventions. The truth of identity, queer theory argues, is too complicated to be apprehended by labels; is simply muted by the forces of identity politics, and often surpasses the language available for grasping it (Gamson 2000; Green 2007b; Stein & Plummer 1994).

Conventional methodologies, are therefore believed to only reify categories

(along with their limitations), and incorrectly claim to capture a reality queer theorists see as only representational. Instead, scholars pose complicated multi-method methodological interventions that draw largely from cultural and literary criticism. Since there are no real subjects, queer theorists claim, nothing can pre-exist its discursive construction – thus the only way to truly apprehend social life is as text. Scholars thus interrogate and deconstruct the social grammar of sexuality in order to examine what is named, how (and where) it is talked about, how it is categorized, and its relative place within heteronormativity. In taking apart categories, they aim to confuse and complicate notions of binary and stable identity. The complete destabilization of categories, they argue, makes them meaningless and reveals their constructed nature (Crawley & Broad 2008; Gamson 2000; Stein & Plummer 1994).

To the contrary, social constructionist approaches to sexuality, are increasingly critical of queer theory's approach to the study of sexualities. Green (2002) has claimed that the emphasis on discourse and texts obscures the very real material, social, and institutional conditions in which social actors actually live (See also Epstein 1996; Gamson 2000; and Plummer 2003) Davis (2008) agrees, and faults the political relativism of poststructuralist thought for failing to recognize that categories of difference have throughout history been successfully used as a strategy of resistance and a source of strength in the face of dominant social relations. Cohen (2007) has charged that the field fails to live up to its promise to expand analyses of sexuality and social power in ways that better address race and class intersections. Moreover, she found that "queer" had come to serve as a scholarly counterpoint to heteronormativity in ways that

occluded huge variances in access to and use of social power that exist even among heteronormative positions. Despite these concerns, constructionists, do agree that there is no such thing as a natural, essential or biological basis for sexualities and see them as social categories, not ontological facts (Crawley & Broad 2008; Gamson 2000). Accordingly, they maintain that society attaches sexual meaning, pleasures and desires to bodies through an array of meaning systems, symbols and interpretive frames.

It is generally agreed that the basic claims of the constructionist paradigm can be attributed to several scholars. McIntosh (1996) applied labeling theory to challenge biological and Freudian theories of sexuality and argue that homosexuality should not be viewed as a diagnosable condition but as a product of modern societies. The systematic stigmatization (by way of social processes) of only certain sexual categories delineates permissible from impermissible social behavior. Sexual identities are in turn crafted through the internalization of these social labels. Simon and Gagnon (2003) claimed that sexualities are organized by the social environment. Humans are not born sexual, they argue, sexuality is learned via social processes that teach individuals what feelings and desires count as sexual and what are the appropriate scripts for sexual behavior.

Plummer (1975) applied this analysis more explicitly to homosexuality to argue that homosexuality is not a natural biological category, but socially learned. While attraction to the same sex might be experienced by the social actor, he or she only learns that these feelings are sexual, and indicative of a homosexual identity in the course of interactions with both the gay and straight world. Weeks (1996) observed that sexualities (homosexuality in particular) have a social history through which it is possible to trace

variations in sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies and behaviors that support wider social systems of sex and gender regulation. Rubin (1992) observed that bodies are mediated by cultural meaning systems which are usually expressed through various social institutions (laws, social practices, and ideologies). These institutions confer rewards or stigma upon all forms of sexual behavior according to their status. Those sexualities within the "charmed circle" of the social hierarchy (procreative, married heterosexuals, and monogamous heterosexuals) receive the greatest social rewards, while all other sexualities are variously stigmatized. This system, she notes, rewards and punishes in ways that "cut across [all] other modes of social inequality . . . wealth, white skin, male gender, and ethnic privileges can mitigate the effects of sexual stratification" (p. 293).

Because constructionists see sexualities as interactively produced, their methods tend to "distinguish the social and interactional processes by which bodies and desires are given meaning, are transformed into social categories with political significance, and into bases for . . . collective action" (Gamson 2000:352). Accordingly, only the most particular and limited claims are made about sexual subjects and theoretical conclusions based on the interpretive processes under investigation are offered regarding the social organization of sexualities (Crawley & Broad, 2008).

Despite the tensions between queer theoretical and constructionist approaches, constructionist scholars have incorporated many of queer theory's best insights regarding the nature of, and methods for studying sexuality. The result is the literature on sexualities has periodically advocated four recommendations for a more robust sociology of sexualities, and a call for new research. First, scholars have identified a

need for more empirical work that integrates intersectional approaches. Given that it is now clear that it is impossible to separate one's sexuality from one's class, one's gender, etc., intersectional work is expected to ideally capture the multiple, shifting character of sexual identities. Second, scholars desire more work that accounts for the constraints of institutional forces – specifically institutionalized discourses and other cultural practices – on individual sexualities and the material realities those structures produce. Third, there is a need for work that acknowledges that social actors are not simply passive recipients of these cultural forces, but make agentic choices to accept some and reject others; thereby constructing their identities in the flow of everyday life. Fourth, it is agreed that it is time to move beyond the study of only homosexuality as a “deviant” identity, and produce more work that also looks at heteronormativity and all that it organizes as deviant as a result of its unmarked status as “normal” and “universal” (Crawley & Broad 2008; Gamson 2000; Plummer 1995; Stein & Plummer 1994).

While I wish to reserve some commentary on theorizing sexualities for the following section, I want to close this section explaining my own orientation to sexualities and how it informs this work. I bring a constructionist perspective to this project which sees sexualities not as fixed, natural states of being, but as complex social products. As scholars have been critical of queer theory's failure to attend to the institutional and the material aspects of social life, or to appropriately capture the experience of racialized sexualities, the constructionist literature not only brings a stronger sociological lens to sexualities research. In particular, its emphasis on structure and material reality has some overlap with the concerns of structural race perspectives.

From this perspective, I attempt to show that black gay men's sexual identities are a product of historically-contingent, ruling discourses that have become embedded in roles of black manhood, and racial hierarchy. I also endeavor to illuminate the various interpretive processes they engage in to produce a narrative of their lives that both conforms to, and resists these ruling discourses. As a result of the system and the processes it organizes, black gay men's sexualities falls into the category of "unnatural" on a number of dimensions.

THEORIZING RACE AND SEXUALITY: INTERSECTIONALITY

While sociologists of race and sexuality have created useful ways of thinking about black gay men's stories, using either single-issue framework can only produce an incomplete picture of their social experience. Structural models of race tend to obscure our understanding of how other categories of identity may interact with and influence the experience of race because they view racial hierarchy as all encompassing; creating relatively similar if not identical experiences of race for social actors. Constructionist models of sexuality, on the other hand, do assume some variability and complexity in individual social experience¹⁵, but often fail to emphasize how interpretive frames, meanings systems or symbols, are organized by larger social structures -- particularly when it comes to race. Where they do tend to account for such structures, they are largely framed as ideological or cultural formations that require access to other social

¹⁵ Although when they do they generally, like any single category framework, conceptualize other aspects of identity in service to the primary category.

structures to become animated. Instead, I wish to acknowledge the influence of structure on social experience in a way that does not mask variations in experience produced by the interaction of other important categories of identity. I also wish to emphasize an understanding of structure that goes beyond cultural discourses and ideology. While the integration of both approaches seems an ideal solution, juxtaposing a structural view of race with a constructionist view of sexuality creates yet another challenging theoretical and methodological dilemma. It is clearly not possible to suggest that a social subject is both real and constructed; and that social life is simultaneously concrete and subjective. Thus it is clear that I need to effectively characterize the both racial and sexual structures that organize black gay men's lives without presenting them as overly determining; while simultaneously describing these men's efforts to negotiate these structures without lapsing into a materialist impulse to portray their accounts of their lives as a sort of meta-narrative about all black gay men.

In order to address these conundrums, I found it useful to turn to the literature on intersectionality (Collins 2000). Intersectional approaches are generally appreciated for moving beyond overly deterministic and binary analyses of the structural relationships that create and maintain social hierarchy (see Anderson 2005; Collins 2000). Such analyses are thought to have limited analytic ability to comprehend the intricate and contradictory dynamics involved in the maintenance of systemic oppression (particularly as those systems manifest in the lives of individuals living at the intersection of multiple structures of oppression), and are believed to inaccurately conceptualize the dynamic of intersecting oppressions as simply additive (Anderson 2005; Collins 2000; Prins 2006;

Stein 2008). Instead, intersectional approaches, tend to engage a slightly more Foucaultian view of power,¹⁶ both at the macro level where it structures group oppression, and at the micro level where it creates individual, subjective experiences of the social world (Collins 2000:274-275). Accordingly, intersectional analyses can reveal a more interpretive dialectic between social actors and the social structures in which their lives are embedded (Collins 2000:274). Moreover, intersectional approaches are said to offer a more complex and rigorous analysis of the operation of social structures and to produce more nuanced analyses of how these structures intertwine, pervade and transform each other (Knudson 2005; Stein 2008). This is because at the structural level, intersectional work captures the compoundedness and complexity of social experience that occurs when multiple social categories are considered simultaneously. In laying out this perspective, Crenshaw (1989) describes that at times a black gay man (for instance) may experience oppression in multiple ways that are not necessarily the cumulative effect of his various statuses. On occasion, he may experience oppression as a black man, at other times for being a gay man. Sometimes he will experience doubled oppression for being both black and gay, and sometimes he may experience oppression based on the unique category of black gay man. To the contrary, single issue analyses fail to consider these intricate possibilities and will often obscure aspects of social

¹⁶ In a traditional Marxist analysis, power is hierarchical and viewed as a material asset – the capacity to forcefully exert one’s will over or suppress another – and it is usually exercised by a ruling elite by virtue of their status and control over social resources. In contrast, Foucault (1977) suggested that power is relational and deployed through discourse – or ruling ideologies – that determine the forms and domains of social reality. Thus power is inextricably linked to knowledge -- it is the ability to create the impression of real social positions, which can be taken up by anyone. It is the daily scrutiny of the individual by society that compels compliance to the ruling ideology, and such surveillance is so pervasive that it can induce self-regulation. Thus, the regulatory nature of discourse is accomplished through the constant threat of punishment.

experience, and ensure that certain group needs will fail to be met (Crenshaw 1989).

But in addition to the enhanced complexity it adds to structural analyses, intersectional work can also be interpretive allowing scholars to account for the myriad ways social actors collude with and resist hegemonic structures of power (Collins 2000; Prins 2006). Consequently, intersectionality can provide immense insights into the motivations of social actors, thereby challenging the presumption that the social world is comprised of pure victims and oppressors. Prins (2006) has suggested that the interpretive capacity of intersectional work can be enhanced by applying constructionist tools. She accomplishes this by using narrative which features the social actor and her/his various relationships to power, at the center of its analysis. The actor's social location is not conceptualized as simply the culmination of numerous structures or externally imposed categories, but also as a narrative project authored by the individual. Thus, the tale the author tells is partly comprised of the available narrative resources for its telling (structure), and partly of their own making (interpretive). Narrative approaches are innately "multilayered and contradictory [making use of existing] scripts of gender, race, ethnicity, [sexuality] and class [which] play a constitutive role, but never in the same way, never as mere determining factors . . . [As a result,] we are simultaneously less and more than the sum of the social categories with which we are identified" (p. 281). This approach to intersectionality stresses the structural production of social positions in a way that does not ignore the hierarchical ordering of race, gender and sexual constructs, but also sees these structures as organizing the interpretive frameworks through which daily experience is organized, and identities produced. This

is a framework that is beginning to be embraced by sexualities scholars but has not been fully developed (see Stein 1997).

Thus, deploying an intersectional analysis of narrative in this work allows me to fully tease out the mutually constitutive frameworks of race, sexuality, gender and class involved in the production of black gay men's identities and to provide an insider's view of their lived experience. But most importantly, the intersectional approach allows for a sort of tenuous fusion of two divergent perspectives of the black gay male subject. In the tradition of critical race scholarship, I am able to identify the operation and consequences of the hierarchical social relations (particularly gender, race and sexuality) that organize the lived experience and identity work of black gay men. On the other hand, I am also able to represent the interpretive and discursive frames these structures create, in order to illuminate how they are encountered by these narrators. As my ultimate goal is not to represent "the" black gay man's experience (such a claim would be inconsistent with the constructivist and queer theoretical paradigms at the foundation of sexualities study), I do wish to illuminate the social role their stories serve.

Uncovering the imbedded themes, intended audiences, and projected meanings of these men's stories is consistent with the interpretive work of traditional sexualities scholarship and should provide a strong foundation from which to theorize about how black gay men's identity work adds to our understanding of gender, sexuality and race in America. I spend the next section describing in some detail how narratives accomplish this dual task of illuminating the interpretive and the structural. I borrow heavily from critical race theory's approach to narrative – which is perhaps the most developed – to

describe how these two levels of analysis are engaged simultaneously.

STORIES AND IDENTITY

Sociologists have long been interested in documenting the lived experience of various social groups. Such analyses frequently rely upon personal narratives to capture the distinctive arrangement of structural conditions, social interactions, and cultural meaning systems that give rise to a coherent sense of self, and to reveal the multifaceted processes by which these dynamics become systematically deployed in the construction of individual and collective identity. What distinguishes narrative from other forms of discourse is the organized pattern by which they are told. Through narrative, the author self-consciously organizes selected past events and characters into a temporal and moral ordering that has a clear beginning, middle, and end; in order to explain how and why the recounted events occurred (Ewick and Sibley 1995:200. See also Plummer 1995). These distinguishing features of narrative exemplify the sociological premise that the self is a social production¹⁷; making stories particularly useful for examining lived experience and identity.

Critical race theorists have suggested that certain stories – particularly those told by people of color (and by extension, those of other marginalized groups) – provide valuable information about the social world. Inherent in the accounts of historic and

¹⁷ Cerulo (1997) accurately traces the study of identity back to the works of Mead and Cooley whose concept of the “looking glass self” first argued that the individual self is generated through social interaction.

contemporary oppression made by subordinated groups, are keen insights into the workings of racialized society -- knowledge that tends to be either obscured from, unknown to or ignored by those of dominant status (Delgado 1990; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Matsuda 1987). Thus, stories of racial discrimination and oppression have the capacity to “jar the comfortable dominant complacency” of white society (Delgado 1989:2438) because they challenge the moral relativism of dominant discourse; expose the vested group interests inherent in dominant practices, and proffer a perspective on social reality that is “akin to feminist consciousness-raising” (Matsuda 1987:331; see also Delgado 1989). In this way, these “stories . . . allow us to uncover a more layered reality than is immediately apparent” (Bell 1999:317; see also Delgado 1989).

As this project relies on narratives to access the experiences of black gay men and to illuminate the structures that organize those experiences, this section provides an overview of theoretical approaches to a “sociology of stories.” My goal is to demonstrate the process by which narratives help the social actor to understand who he or she is while simultaneously situating them within a larger structural framework of race and sexuality. As a result, I will illustrate that stories, when told, are not neutral social phenomenon. Stories either reify the dominant structures in which they are embedded, or are a conscious act of resistance to them. I will also discuss a specific genre of storytelling, the sexual story, which has historically served to facilitate the notion of a cohesive gay and lesbian community, but has come to be told in new ways in the post modern age that consider more complex social locations – for example, the intersection

of race and sexuality. In describing these shifts, I will explain how this investigation of the identity work of black gay men provides an ideal circumstance for the exploration of these transformations in the sexual story.

Storying the Self

Stories are essential in the production of social selves. McQueeny (2009) noted that scholars see identity as “shaped by macro discourses and structures and everyday interactions,” and as such identities are fluid across different contexts and situations (p. 152). More specifically, Loseke (2007) suggested that “stories exist at all levels of human life to produce cultural, institutional, organizational and personal identities¹⁸ and may be the way that human beings make sense of their own lives and the lives of others” (p. 661). Berger and Quinney (2004) observed that “stories are ways not merely of telling others about ourselves but of constructing our identities, of finding purpose and meaning in our lives” and as such, they are critical to the project of understanding who we are as social beings (p. 5). Holstein and Gubrium (2000) agree that the self is accomplished through narrative means, and view the self as grounded in the everyday,

¹⁸ Based upon Loseke’s (2007) review of the literature, she identifies *cultural narratives* or formula stories as relating the set of “imagined characteristics” about “disembodied” social groups used to “construct symbolic boundaries around types of social actors.” An example would be jokes that perpetuate prevailing stereotypes about blacks. *Institutional narratives of identity* also generate imagined characteristics about social collectivities, but are produced through policy making. They are used to “justify policy decisions and legitimize institutional arrangements.” An example would be the stories of the “welfare queen” (a narrative about poor black women) which were circulated widely throughout the 1980s to justify the dismantling of social welfare programs. *Organizational narratives of identity* are produced by social institutions which use them to “inform service provision for the unique people who use agency services.” An example would be stories about Arab or black American criminality disseminated via the media and law enforcement to justify racial profiling. Personal narratives are used to produce “personal identities and self-understandings of unique embodied selves” (pp. 661-662).

local world and produced through one's interpretations of their interactions with that world. For these authors, the social self or "the self we live by," is the story we agentically create using the socially available narrative resources for its construction. These narrative resources can include material and non-material cultural elements such as "collective myths, archetypes, symbols, linguistic forms and vocabularies of motive," and are used to provide stories with universal meaning (Berger & Quinney 2005:4). Ostensibly, social actors simultaneously perform and co-author a life story that "is partly of our own making: we enter upon a stage already set, and our lives for the most part follow the course of already available narrative scripts . . . Our stories are multilayered and contradictory [as] scripts of gender, race, ethnicity and class play a constitutive role, but never in the same way, [and] never as mere determining factors" (Prins 2006:218).

In addition to shaping individual identity, stories have been detected in the production of collective identities. For example, Plummer (1995) observed that collectively told and shared stories of sexual identity helped to facilitate gay communities during the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly, critical race scholars note that shared stories of oppression facilitate social bonds, group cohesion, shared understandings and meanings of the world that are essential to group survival, mental health and liberation (Delgado 1989:69). "In-group" members hearing these stories can become "emboldened" as they recognize in them shared thoughts and experiences, that allow them to give voice to their own oppression and appreciate that they are not alone (Delgado 1989:70).

For these reasons, individual and collective identity cannot be reduced to a just a

set of characteristics said to define what kind of person someone is, or to which group one belongs. Instead, as Barker and Willis (2005) remind us, identity is a highly reflexive undertaking facilitated by cultural and social resources, contextualized by dynamics of social status and power, and fundamentally unfixed. Identity can thus be construed as “a story of self” that is constantly being written as it is told and retold. As a “work in progress,” stories of self are attendant to shifting norms, changing social milieux, and new interactions that force constant renegotiation, as one moves towards a perceived ideal and conformity with one’s own and society’s expectations. Thus the production of a coherent personal identity is a life-long process (Loseke 2007). Because this coherent tale is ultimately crafted from “local resources” it is useful to briefly examine one of the prominent forms such resources take, and how they influence the production of personal narratives.

Cultural Narratives

Cultural narratives of identity or *formula stories*¹⁹ form the foundation of the

¹⁹ Loseke (2007) identified a variety of terms scholars use to reference cultural narratives of identity. Among these are “cultural codes,” “semiotic codes,” “interpretive codes,” “cultural themes,” “ideological frames,” and Foucault’s “discursive regimes” (p. 665). Cultural narratives also bear some similarity to the Lakoff’s work on metaphor (see Santa Ana, 2002). Both metaphors and cultural narratives reflect important cultural values and prevailing ideologies and specify relationships between social actors/groups and those values. But, whereas metaphors organize relationships between ideas and concepts (e.g. “Latinos are like a flood” is a metaphor that links Latino immigration to a destructive force), narratives seek to further situate these relationships within the social structure. In essence, formula stories explain the how, why and so what behind the related concepts (e.g. “If there are too many Latinos, they will destroy the important cultural heritage and distinctiveness of white America” is a plotline that explains why Latinos are a destructive force in terms of race and national identity). The sociology of narrative also parallels the way that critical race scholars conceptualize public and legal discourse and the importance of counternarrative. These parallels are discussed more explicitly in a section to follow.

“narrative resources” used in the construction of personal stories of identity (Loseke 2007). These widely circulating stories with their relatable plotlines and characters use typification (descriptions of “typical” actors engaging in “typical” behaviors within “typical” plots resulting in predictable moral evaluations) in order to fix imagined characteristics to disembodied social groups, prescribe social relationships, and construct symbolic boundaries (Loseke 2007 pp. 664, 666). Stories fulfill these functions by employing broad archetypes (usually binary opposites such as good mothers and bad mothers, the deserving poor versus the undeserving poor, or heterosexuals versus homosexuals) and discursively composing them in some sort of conflict as the principle plot device (Loseke 2007:666). Familiar formula stories in American culture include **rags to riches** tales (i.e. Horatio Alger stories) in which poor but hard working individuals are rewarded with success and riches whereas those unwilling to work hard experience failure and ruin; or romantic **boy meets girl** tales in which heterosexual love produces lifelong prosperity and happiness whereas non-traditional relationships (for example, gay, lesbian, or interracial) have tragic consequences. Such tales are universally disseminated in such an uncoordinated fashion that determining their true authorship is difficult. As a result, everyone can be said to have participated in perpetuating such stories.

A number of factors contribute to the potency, appeal and believability of formula stories. First, they are generally seen as articulating important social truths of how the world does and should work. Second, they may invoke professional or scientific authority for credibility. Third, they reflect prevailing ideologies that are deeply held

within the collective consciousness and as such, they appear as recurrent themes in media and popular culture (e.g. film, television, news outlets, etc.). Finally, they tend to rely on easily discernable characters and plots, and deploy vivid, dramatic and flamboyant storylines that simplify the social world by providing uncomplicated explanations for recent or dramatic events. Because of the intentionally non-specific nature of cultural narratives, they tend to inadequately reflect the lives or characteristics of the specific social actors they are crafted to embody, but employ one-dimensional characters that can easily be evaluated as either “good” or “bad.” In addition, cultural narratives can be characterized as having a penchant for drama and generalization, but are nonetheless believable because they confirm what the public claims to already know, value, and regard as appropriate ways to be and behave (Loseke 2007:665).

Narrative Reflexivity

The support that formula stories provide to other forms of narrative signifies a natural interplay among them. These reflexive dynamics – in that each narrative form simultaneously interacts with and informs others – are a natural outgrowth of the historical and local contexts in which all narratives tend to be rooted. This is why Loseke (2007) concluded that stories “to be evaluated as believable . . . must at least partially reflect the kinds of stories that prevail in . . . culture” (p. 673). Thus, storytelling is not a freewheeling endeavor. Individuals must construct stories that conform to the existing collection of socially circulating narratives or risk being seen as odd or eccentric.

Consequently, social actors are expected to use existing formula stories to interpret their own troubles and experiences, and to construct their own narratives. Cultural narratives thus tend to become institutionalized and exert immense influence on the social world. It is not uncommon to find formula stories woven into the fabric of social institutions; sometimes developing into formal organizational and institutional narratives that guide the organizing logic and practices of local and national organizations. As a result of these reflexive dynamics, narratives are said to mediate the relationship between daily social interaction and large-scale social structures (Ewick and Sibley 1995).

Narrative in Everyday Social Life - Hegemonic Tales and Subversive Stories

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the values and ideologies expressed in cultural narratives are universal when, in fact, they often reflect only dominant social beliefs and ideals. Accordingly, the existing repertoire of cultural narratives are structured, framed and performed in ways that “articulate and reproduce existing ideologies and hegemonic relations of power and inequality” and are thus referred to as *hegemonic tales* (Ewick and Sibley 1995:212).²⁰ Hegemonic tales accomplish the goal of reinforcing dominant power structures by relating specific stories that depict “specific persons existing in particular social, physical, and historical locations . . . [that do not expose] the connections [between] the specific story and [its characters] to the

²⁰ A perfect illustration of a hegemonic tale is Feagin’s (2009) white racial frame. This “overarching worldview . . . encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” that are animated by narratives, characters and plotlines of white superiority and black inferiority which guide individual action (p. 3). They have a taken for granted quality, but are nonetheless crucial to the reproduction and maintenance of white supremacy and systemic racism in America.

structure of relations and institutions that made the story plausible” (Ewick and Sibley 1995:214). Through the continuous telling and retelling of these stories in all kinds of narrative formats (e.g. cultural, personal, institutional and organizational narratives) and by multiple social actors, the durability of the hegemonic tale is enhanced. Moreover, the repetitive performance of hegemonic tales affords the narrative with legitimacy and neutrality; masking its complicity with existing power relations. As a result, the relationships it relates are presented as part of a “natural order of things,” thereby foreclosing the opportunity to challenge, critique or test its embedded assumptions about power. Consequently, hegemonic tales are assumed by most social actors to be illustrative of the way the world should work.

For critical race theorists, the hegemonic tale is referred to as a “stock story.” As a specific type of hegemonic tale, the stock story focuses on racial matters and seeks to “[justify] the world as it is by perpetuating the distribution of rights, privileges, and opportunity established under a regime of uncontested white supremacy” (Aguirre 2000:319). Stock stories operate in racially neutral language and articulate the repertoire of motivations, explanations, justifications and points of view commonly used to interpret racial phenomena in ways that not only mask the unequal power relations inherent to racialized society, but help to frame people of color as racial subordinates. Ultimately, because stock stories are told to make current arrangements of race seem fair and natural (Delgado 1989), critical analysis of them can be instructive with regard to understanding the prevailing arrangement of “social processes, social structures, and social situations” of race (Aguirre 2000:320).

Thus, it cannot be understated that when a narrative operates as a hegemonic tale or as a stock story it performs an important social control function. Such tales not only specify social expectations and the consequences of nonconformity, but their unexamined and persuasive claims about social life come to occupy the collective consciousness. This is because the hegemonic tale/stock story is well scripted and performed to provoke high levels of emotional identification and commitment. It will selectively utilize events to make implicit claims about truth and causality, and use repetitive themes, drama, detail and recognizable characters to enhance their believability.

But it is important to see hegemonic tales and stock stories as contested social phenomenon. Because they embody the chief concerns of only the most privileged of society, the values, beliefs and experiences of those on the social margins come to be reflected in less prominent, but rival formula stories. Ewick and Sibley (1995) characterize these rival tales as *subversive stories* because they seek to defy and transform the dominant narrative. Subversive stories (unlike hegemonic tales) seek to specify the relationship between the local and the structural, and accomplish this by recounting experience as rooted in and shaped by a larger cultural, material, and political world. In this regard, subversive stories are reminiscent (if not identical to) *counter stories* described in critical race scholarship which “rather than being simple anecdotal accounts, organize minority experiences into temporally meaningful episodes that constitute the everyday lives of people of color . . . [and] expose the continuing influence of race and racism on their daily lives” (Han 2008:13). Counter-stories offer a direct

challenge to the racial stock story by providing alternative interpretations of racial situations, unofficial accounts, and insight into existing social arrangements and institutional practice in the form of individual narratives of discrimination and oppression (Aguirre 2000). Counter stories thus endeavor to reveal the institutional and ideological practices that maintain white supremacy and the subordination for blacks and other people of color. As Aguirre (2000) observed, the counter-story makes “clear who owns and operates the tools of reality production.” Notably, counter-stories need not only emerge from individual experience. Fictionalized accounts also have the capacity to convey real experiences, and in asking listeners to imagine those realities, can still convey particular truths about the social world (Scheppelle 1989).

However they are told the counter-story has the ability to challenge complacency with the existing racial order. This is because like subversive stories, they draw explicit associations between everyday experience and the structural factors that shape them. Subversive tales and counter-stories directly dispute the obscuring of such connections (a distinctive feature of hegemonic tales and stock stories) between the hegemonic narrative itself and the social relations of power those narratives seek to maintain. Subversive stories thus are a form of active resistance to dominant narratives and the material conditions of oppression they support. They openly question the accuracy of its epistemological claims, provide insight into the operation and motivations of the dominant social order, and enhance the possibility of intervention and resistance.

It is important to acknowledge that because subversive stories generally emerge from the social margins, the circumstances of their emergence are particularly sensitive

to historical and local contexts. Ostensibly, the right conditions must be in place for the narrative to be heard, shared and appreciated as representative of a commonly-held experience.²¹ Nonetheless once they emerge, subversive stories “bring some understanding of the unstated assumptions of privilege and thereby validate the experiences of those individuals and groups that live outside of the structures of privilege” (Ewick and Sibley 1995:217).

Sexual Stories

These complex dynamics of narrative can be readily observed in Plummer’s (1995) discussion of *sexual stories*. These “personal experience narratives of the intimate,” are illustrative of what might be classified as subversive stories that have largely been deployed as personal narratives of identity and as stories of collective identity which have helped shape a community and its culture.

For example, Plummer (1995) observed that gay and lesbian coming out stories tended to share common plotlines that included an unhappy childhood, followed by a growing awareness of one’s sexuality, and resulting in a search for community before coming to terms with a gay or lesbian identity. This common storyline became a sort of cultural narrative that served to facilitate gay community in the 1970s and 80s and

²¹ For example, the Black church in America as the only setting in which Blacks could publicly gather collectively and safely without white reprisal, became the setting in which individual stories of racist acts could coalesce into a collective narrative of white racism and supremacy. Gradually, what was once simply a subversive story of survival, evolved into an active movement of resistance. Thus the church, because of Blacks’ on-going efforts to safeguard this social institution from white interference, was fertile ground for a subversive story about race in America to emerge, and became an active site of black political mobilization at various moments in American history.

helped to “define a reality that makes gay personhood tighter and ever more plausible” (Plummer 1995:87).

Recently, Plummer (1995) observed a movement away from the universal coming out story. Today, he has suggested that stories of gay and lesbian identity increasingly feature the narrator as subject over external experts, reveal a greater diversity of perspectives on sexual identity over a single notion of a right kind of sexuality, and incorporate a complex and integrated view of identity over an exclusive emphasis on sexuality (p. 134). As a result, Crawley and Broad (2004) observed that “in late modernity the storyteller who constructs the “reality” of sexuality may be becoming everyone, and the stories themselves appear to be proliferating and fracturing to suit the multiple and saturated selves that seem to befit the times” (p. 43). Thus like other scholars of narrative, sexualities researchers have noted that storytelling and the analysis of the stories people tell provides an effective method for apprehending the innately fluid nature of sexual identities as they are produced within specific contexts - strategic, political, circumstantial, and institutional (Gamson 2000). This expansion in sexual storytelling brought on by new audiences, voices and plotlines, led Plummer (1995) to suggest that additional research be done in this area in order “to understand more about the ways in which sexual storytelling is changing” (p. 179).

CONCLUSION

Narratives provide extraordinary insight into the social world. They are powerful

social artifacts that construct our identities, reflect and disseminate cultural values, and structure individual, organizational and institutional actions. When deployed, they can either reify dominant norms or mobilize resistance to the existing social order. But most importantly either implicitly or explicitly, narratives locate the social actor within a larger structural framework that helps the actor to understand who he or she is. The use of narrative in this project accomplishes something that is difficult to do via single category, structural, or constructionist approaches. Narratives provide us access to the social actor's complex categorical experiences in a way that implicate the pervasive structural systems of inequality that organize social life, and enable us to understand how these individuals understand and negotiate those pervasive systems on a daily basis. This has the potential to illuminate a multidimensionality of social experience – its structural and socially constructed aspects; and the confluence of multiple categories of identity – that is rarely (if ever) captured in empirical work.

Thus this project moves us in a new direction by taking up a specific type of cultural and personal narratives – the sexual story – and satisfies Plummer's recommendation to examine the post-modern sexual tale. Black gay men's sexual stories are arguably a new voice in the pantheon of sexual stories and hold great potential for understanding how that lived experience coalesces into a shared story of identity and what social arrangements facilitate its production. I accomplish this by examining both the content of these stories, or what it is that Black gay men say about what it means to be black and gay, as well the social factors that appear to organize the production of those stories. Secondly, this analysis incorporates a more complex view of racial and

sexual identity taking into account the intersection of race, sexuality and gender.

Anzaldua (1995) reminds us that this complexity is intrinsic to such “borderlands” – or the spaces between identities or cultures because the production of authentic identity in such spaces is encumbered by limitations imposed by existing structures and discourses, which often take on an essentialist quality. Therefore, deepening our understanding of the processes by which these limits are engaged and perhaps transcended advances our comprehension of how the self is both influenced by, and simultaneously influences social realities of race, sexuality and gender. In addition, our appreciation of how stories are used to construct new possibilities and categories of being is furthered through this research. Finally, placing the subjectivity of black gay men at the analytical center of this analysis brings the discursive frames in which they live and construct themselves into sharper focus. This insider’s perspective permits a more robust examination of the pathological, negative and limiting aspects of these constructions and to see up close, the artful and creative ways in which members of this community story themselves free of these restrictions in the effort to create an authentic and holistic identity.

CHAPTER III
HEGEMONIC TALES AND SUBVERSIVE STORIES:
STORYING BLACK (GAY) MEN

Stories told about black gay men do more than relate specific experiences and the local circumstances in which those experiences take place. As demonstrated, stories both reflect and reify existing social relations, which means that the formula stories and counter narratives told about black gay men's lives are encoded with existing relations of power; normative boundaries of race, sexuality and gender; and are representative of institutional arrangements that organize the social location of black gay men.

In this section, I wish to highlight the specific structural arrangements that have shaped varying accounts and social locations of black male homosexuality. I share these stories within a historical framework in order to highlight the connections between specific hegemonic tales and subversive stories and the particular ideologies of race, sex and gender normality they either signify or challenge. My goal is to illuminate the reflexive dynamics between the local and the structural by illuminating how these social arrangements regulate both how and in what way stories of black gay men are told; enable or limit the existential potential for black gay men's identities; and facilitate distinct social projects of race, gender, sexuality and class.

HEGEMONIC TALES OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND BLACK BRUTES

It has become a widely accepted axiom among scholars that sexualities have been both a powerful and convenient canvas for making racial distinctions (Carter 2007; Collins 2004; Ferguson 2007; Nagel 2003 and Sommerville 2000). European ethnocentrism and emerging notions of white supremacy, quickly came to rely on the framing of racial others as sexually immoral even before the formation of contemporary racial ideology or the American colonies (Smedley 1999). The propensity to mark racial distinctions by way of sexual behaviors (both real and imagined) generated particularly vile stereotypes and narratives of black sexuality which have circulated widely throughout the course of American history. Blacks have been described as sexually wanton, uncivilized, fearsome, and repulsive – all in stark contrast to the common portrayals of white sexuality as natural and wholesome ²² (Collins 2004, Nagel 2003). Nagel (2003) has defined this overall pattern of relating valorized notions of white heterosexuality to devalued, non-dominant group sexualities as an *ethnosexual construction* (p. 10). Eventually, these stock accounts of black sexuality became firmly embedded in the discourses of late 19th century eugenics and sexology “science”

²² This would include notions of black sexual insatiability, promiscuity, which most often included the view of black men as sexual “brutes” whose sexual insatiability and primitively indiscriminate sexual behaviors made him a dangerous sexual predator that was particularly threatening to white female purity. Such claims were frequently invoked and used to justify widespread lynching of black men. For a detailed discussions of the brute archetype and depictions of black men’s sexuality, see Apel (2004) or Bogle (2001).

(Sommerville 2000), as well as an array of early 20th century popular literatures (Carter 2007).²³

According to Sommerville (2000), sexuality became a formal element of the existing language for expressing racial boundaries in order to give voice to white anxieties about racial distinction and separation. Eugenics scientists eager to locate the scientific basis for racial distinction were easily drawn to the sexologists' efforts to distinguish the homosexual body. As differences between the races had already been claimed to reside on the body, it was a short and relatively easy intellectual leap for eugenicists to assert that black women's presumed "aggressive" and "primitive" sexual behavior was a function of the same oversized genitalia that sexologists claimed was typical of lesbians (Sommerville 2000:27-28). Such assertions only reified the belief that black women were sexually available and insatiable, and provided the necessary justification for white men's pervasive sexual aggression towards black women. But like all race science, the claims (asserted as scientific "fact") that the black female body and libido, were unnatural and exaggerated in relation to white women, was only conjecture, embellishment, and lies. Moreover, the empirical evidence used as the basis for these declarations (which were generalized to all blacks) defied conventional scientific practice which did not tend to base universal scientific conclusions on women's bodies. Moreover, Sommerville (2000) observed that scientists managed to make such claims without even bothering to provide objective measures or empirical proof of what they

²³ While these ideas are discussed with some detail below, it is worth noting here that Carter (2007) specifically observes discussions of "normality" in popular film, literature, marriage advice publications, medical "nervousness" literature and sexual education directed to adolescents. Together, he claims that this body of work discretely emphasized the importance of white heterosexuality and marriage for the maintenance of white superiority.

construed as the “normal,” female body.

The simple allegation that important physical distinctions **did** exist between white and black women’s bodies was offered as conclusive proof of the overall differences between the races and of black inferiority. When applied to black men, these arguments helped shape the narrative of the black “brute.” This narrative of black male sexuality characterized them as innately savage, violent and criminal. The brute was a hideous and sociopathic creature whose sexual drive was so out of control that he was an irredeemable social menace, who was particularly dangerous to white women (Apel 2004; Bogle 2001). Such notions were used to justify widespread violence against black men. The mere accusation that a black man had been forward with a white woman, would unleash unspeakable and violent reprisals on individual black men, their families, or entire black communities.²⁴

In contrast to earlier representations of the emasculated black male (e.g. the Sambo and the Uncle) which helped generate moral support for slave society, the “brute,” was a direct consequence of the unique social arrangements that accompanied Jim Crow. At a time when white ownership of black bodies was no longer valid, new socio-cultural systems emerged to both mark and diminish blackness and maintain white supremacy. The brute stereotype thus provided the rationale for a social system of separation that also sought to symbolically emasculate²⁵ black men by undermining

²⁴ Ralph Ginzburg’s *100 Years of Lynchings* provides hundreds of graphic lynching accounts compiled from U.S. newspapers dated from 1886-1960. These accounts reveal the prevalence with which the alleged sexual assault of a white woman was used to justify the lynching of black men. In cases where the accused was able to get away, Ginzburg (1996) relates accounts in which the white mob would target the accused family members and/or random blacks throughout the community.

²⁵ It is notable that in addition to the symbolic castration of the Jim Crow system, that one of the most

their ability to fulfill the expectations of modern manhood. Politically and legally disenfranchised; forced to be subservient to whites; unable to respond to verbal or physical attack; limited in his ability to provide for himself and his family; excluded from rights of property ownership or opportunities for entrepreneurship; and viewed as sexually uncivilized; black masculinity was fundamentally devalued in the eyes of whites and blacks alike (Ross 2004). And as a result, any potential threat that overwhelming numbers of freed blacks might pose to individual whites or white society overall, was substantially reduced.

But the organization of American society around this racist ideology required the institutionalization of these racial/sexual narratives in social and cultural practices. So, in the same way that white racial superiority came to be codified in the law (López 2006), so too did a series of legal cases²⁶ vest the state with both interest and authority to name and classify bodies based on ethnosexual differences. Deferring to eugenicists' and sexologists' claims that racial/sexual distinctions resided on the body; American jurisprudence asserted a compelling state interest in making such distinctions and found this ethnosexual framing to be an ideal idiom for articulating the "natural" distinctions

gruesome aspects of the widespread lynchings that occurred during the same period was castration (Ginzburg 2001).

²⁶ Sommerville (2000) explains that the American public was fascinated with the Plessy v Ferguson, and Oscar Wilde legal cases which institutionalized notions of bifurcated identity ("black/white" and "heterosexual/homosexual") and settled the question of who would control language and representations of race and sexuality. Notably, Sommerville (2000) observed, the idea that there existed a state interest (as opposed to an individual interest) in the naming and categorization of bodies was perhaps first publicly acknowledged by Plessy's attorney who claimed that the primary question in the case was "not as to the equality of the privileges enjoyed, but the right of the state to label one citizen as white and another as colored." Similarly, the trial of Oscar Wilde fundamentally concerned who (the individual or the state) had the right to articulate "the love that dare not speak its name." Ultimately, she argues, "[t]hese trials reveal the existence of a cultural desperation regarding rights in language and control of language over the social construction of identity" (p. 9).

between the races, and the basic need for racial separation. Thus the simultaneous, narrative construction of white heterosexual normalcy and black sexual deviancy became an important cultural resource for the institutionalization of white supremacy. As Sommerville (2000) stated, “the resulting eroticization of the color line in the early twentieth century . . . revealed a racial fantasy inextricably tied to the logic of compulsory heterosexuality. Both legalized and de facto racial segregation served not only to demand constant adherence to the fictions of racial identity, but also to police sexual mobility” (p. 35).

MORE HEGEMONIC TALES OF “NORMAL” (WHITE) AMERICANS AND COMPULSORY HETEROSEXUALITY

By the early 20th century, these overt expressions of white racial superiority by way of ethnosexual discourses had evolved into a more racially-evasive narrative. According to Carter (2007), the need for this subtler racial dialogue grew out of mounting social disapproval for overtly hostile manifestations of racism, transformations in work and middle-class lifestyle that accompanied the rapidly modernizing society, increasing consumerism, and rising economic and social competition from blacks.²⁷

²⁷ Carter (2007) notes that by the 1880s medical journals began to report that the demands and “overstimulation” brought about by an increasingly administrative labor force, and the urban, capitalist society was making white America – particularly white elites – “nervous.” This, the journals argued was sapping the reproductive potential of white America by way of pervasive sexual disinterest and wastefulness. As growing numbers of African Americans both pushed for and gained greater social and economic opportunity along with massive immigration of white ethnics, white elites openly worried that their superior social standing was in jeopardy. Appeals to marriage appeared to offer an ideal solution as it could both stabilize the white family, and ensure the procreation of the white race. To this end, a popular

These conditions fueled public concern over the physical health of white America and its ability to maintain its superior position in American culture. In response, medical writing, public sex education, and popular periodicals began to openly advocate for the virtues (and pleasures) of marriage, monogamy, and procreative sexuality; suggesting that such “normal,” sexuality was the cure for white America’s ills. The resulting discourse of the “average” or “normal American,” Carter (2007) argues only served to further juxtapose whiteness and heterosexuality as critical benchmarks for defining who was a socially acceptable American. The narrative relied heavily on claims of “average” or “normal” behavior²⁸ and the virtuous, disciplined white body it created. Based on Carter’s (2007) analysis, it is clear that the new narrative character of the “normal American,” as epitomized by his/her capacity for monogamous, heterosexual marriage, became the distinctive marker of whiteness, and the superiority of white civilization.

In defining the normal American in terms of race and heterosexuality, any and all sexualities outside of procreative sex between white citizens came to be seen as inherently unnatural, unfulfilling and perverse. Carter (2007) points out that this new ethnosexual discourse not only reified the social location of heterosexual whiteness, but did so in ways that intentionally foreclosed public debate about alternative constructions of human behavior. As there could be no reasonable alternative to what was considered “normal” sexual behavior (i.e. white procreative heterosexuality), ideological

industry emerged of marriage advice periodicals that both advocated for marriage, guided men in how to select “good” wives; women in how to be “good wives,” and couples in how to have good sexual relations (a perquisite of procreative couples). The advocacy for monogamous, heterosexual marriage and procreative sexuality was so pervasive, that sex education based on these themes, became a mainstay of mass public education for white citizens.

²⁸ Often as assessed by what behaviors had been measured as being statistically average for white Americans.

justifications for white superiority and ownership of civilization came to be viewed as taken for granted social facts (Carter 2007; Ferguson 2004).

A RACIAL COUNTERNARRATIVE AND A HEGEMONIC SEXUAL TALE: THE POLITICS OF RESPECTABILITY

By the dawn of the Progressive era blacks had begun to develop a formal, antiracist response to the pervasive and negative portrayals of black sexuality. Originating in efforts by black women's clubs ²⁹ (which were largely composed of middle-class, educated, and Christian-identified black women), the collective response eventually came to include both middle and working class, black organizations as well as men's groups such as the Prince Hall Freemasons, Black fraternal and sororal organizations, and the Women's Convention of the Black Baptist Church. The resulting anti-racist strategy dubbed "the politics of respectability," was infused with middle class, Christian values. Its objective of black racial uplift had two primary audiences: African Americans, who were encouraged to behave respectably for the good of the race, and whites who needed to see that African Americans could be respectable and therefore deserving of full citizenship in American life (Walcott 2001; White 2001). To

²⁹ Black women's clubs grew out of the widespread racism that prevented them from joining the white women's clubs that had become popular among middle class white women in the late 1800s into the 1920s. White women's clubs emerged from community efforts at literary exploration and self improvement, because women were largely denied the opportunity for college education after the Civil War; they also took on such social issues as women's suffrage, housing reform, family health and welfare, child labor laws and women's education. Their black counterparts were almost exclusively dedicated to Black social progress, and to Black women's progress in particular. Adopting the motto "Lifting as we climb" these groups organized anti-lynching campaigns, challenged Jim Crow laws, encouraged Black education, and published newspapers designed to provide an alternative view of Blacks' readiness for full citizenship.

accomplish these goals, advocates of the perspective saw it as their duty to not only admonish their peers to “behave,” but to police the public and private domains of black community life.

Respectability was a highly contested discourse.³⁰ Many found its fundamental narrative, which recast blacks as worthy of social inclusion in behavioral terms, suffocating. This may be due to the fact that the narrative also stressed both the need and the innate capacity (depending on the audience) for blacks to demonstrate sexual propriety; decorum; neatness in appearance, attire and property; temperance; thrift; and polite manners. The discourse was viewed as essential to a collective strategy aimed at accessing jobs, housing and eventually equal rights (Cohen 2007; Ritterhouse 2006; White 2001; Wolcott 2001). In this vein, respectable black men needed to be “productive;” meaning (at a minimum) a commitment to honest work and financial self-sufficiency. But this did not rule out the expectation that a black man should also strive for career and professional success. Thus black racial uplift tended to lionize black masculinity and discursively (if not literally) link his successes with overall black social and political progress. Thus, if black men could become “masters of their own fate,” then all was (would be) well for black people (Summers 2004:83).

³⁰ According to Summers (2004) while many black groups espoused the value of respectability, not everyone did so and of those who did, not everyone did so for the same reasons. Many black artists, particularly those of the Harlem Renaissance and others associated with the burgeoning Jazz scene of the 1920s, saw respectability as an oppressive ideology that instead of instilling collective black pride, was closed-minded, expressed embarrassment towards the rural and urban poor, and strongly appealed to whiteness. It was true that many elite and middle class blacks who advocated for “respectability,” did so in order to draw class-based distinctions between themselves and poor and working class blacks in order to gain the privileges of white Victorian society (which was indeed one of the obvious paradoxes of respectability politics). For more nationalist groups who lamented both the ills of urban life and the materialism of the black middle class, respectability operated as a more inclusive political strategy (poor, working class, middle class, and the elite) “geared at building a physically and mentally superior black population” (p. 89).

In addition to personal responsibility, sexuality was a central concern of respectability efforts. The reconstruction of black sexuality as “normal,” generally required intense scrutiny of public and private behaviors, and constant admonitions against the “immoralities” of promiscuity and homosexuality. For black men, this took the form of regular chiding to commit themselves to a life of virtue, character, marriage, monogamy, fatherhood and the protection of black womanhood. The emphasis on mirroring the cultural prescription for procreative heterosexuality was so fundamental to respectability efforts, that black gay men became **the** cultural (and frequently evoked) symbol of moral decay within the black community.³¹ Advocates of black respectability openly excoriated homosexuality as a degenerate perversion brought about by urban living that threatened to destabilize black families. As homosexuality came to represent respectability advocate’s greatest fears – a spoiled public image which would forfeit the cultural capital gained through years of assimilation and protest and diminish all potential for future progress – the leadership of several, important black organizations began to actively root out known homosexuals from religious and leisure spaces (Chauncey 1994; Cohen 2007; Summers 2004). These efforts were intense and personal. Prominent church leaders preached sermons against homosexuality, and sometimes indicted (largely by innuendo) specific congregants believed to be engaging in such

³¹ It is also worth noting that policing women’s sexuality (both heterosexual women, and “mannish” women) was the primary target of respectability efforts, black gay men become implicated for at least one major reason. While black homosexuality is undoubtedly as old as time, WWI mobilization and the Great Migration which followed, brought large numbers of blacks into urban areas and facilitated the emergence of large, visible black and gay communities (Chauncey 1994). Notably, Chauncey notes that it was the campaign against homosexuality within black communities that garnered the attention and support of the black press and white church leaders which only emboldened the black middle class in their efforts at respectability.

behavior. Black newspapers printed the personal information of men arrested for female impersonation or homosexual solicitation; and ran gossip columns that reprinted rumors concerning the marriage troubles and/or sexual antics of specific individuals (Chauncey 1994; Summers 2004).

Undoubtedly, much of the hostility expressed in the politics of respectability towards same sex behavior lay in the fact that the prevailing sexual regime of the early twentieth century associated the homosexual man with “the fairy.” Wildly effeminate, the fairy – or “sissy,” “pansy,” or “nancy” – had abdicated much, if not all, claim to masculinity; taking on many of the gendered qualities of femininity. Fairies were portrayed as mincing, lisping, characters who dressed in women’s clothing and addressed one another using feminine appellations and pronouns (Chauncey 1994).³² The fairy was incompatible with the ideals of black manhood as espoused by the politics of respectability; and was certainly viewed as antithetical (if not destructive) to the objective of racial progress. Moreover, in black communities, homosexuality was associated with “low-life” activities – gambling, prostitution, drinking, and salacious entertainments – that were common in many of the working class speakeasies, clubs and tenement parties that had become widespread amusements in the segregated, urban

³² It is difficult to describe homosexuality or gayness either broadly or within African American communities at this point in time with any sense of uniformity. As Chauncey (1994) notes, there were (as there are today) a variety of terms and subjectivities associated with same sex behaviors from about 1900 until WWII. While the fairy was one of the principle tropes of the era, other terms and identities were also prominent and often differed by class, race, ethnicity and personality. Men who did not identify as “fairies” but were nonetheless same-sex attracted did refer to themselves as “gay” or “queer,” whereas the term “faggot” was most often used in African American and some white, ethnic, working class communities to refer to effeminate men. Many heterosexual-identified men, who engaged in sexual relationships with fairies, were referred to as “trade” by their sexual partners and were often not considered gay by others, provided that they did not adopt effeminate behaviors. The sexual framework used today, which associates homosexuality or “gayness” exclusively with a predilection for same-sex sexuality, did not emerge until the 1940s and 50s.

communities in which large numbers of blacks had begun to settle as a consequence of the Great Migration (Chauncey 1994).

While there was a brief period during prohibition in which male and female cross-dressed performers were a popular attraction in the numerous clubs, speakeasies, and drag shows that dotted many urban areas, public opinion by the 1930s had come to regard public expression of homosexuality as a social vice that needed to be expunged. As a result, a great deal of pressure was placed on gays and lesbians to live less visible lives (Chauncey 1994). Within black communities the narrative of respectability continued to hold sway and was often invoked as justification for scrutinizing behaviors thought to detract from racial progress. This narrative, and the ideologies they supported, evolved over time into a prominent feature of the Civil Rights Movement where it was regularly leveraged for its political and moral advantages. As a result from the 1930s through the 1950s, black gay life moved underground as black gays and lesbians discovered that the choice to behave discretely would not only keep them out of jail,³³ but also help achieve toleration, if not invisibility within the black community and show their support of the larger civil rights effort (Chappell, Hutchinson & Ward 2004 ; Chauncey 1994).

³³ The movement underground was also inspired by concerted attack on gay and lesbian public spaces. Police agencies, local newspapers (who printed the names of those arrested for cross dressing, suspicion of immoral behavior or being in gay establishments) and state liquor authorities — to name a few institutions — became quite aggressive in policing gay visibility and were successful in pushing much of it underground.

THE EVOLUTION OF A HEGEMONIC TALE: RADICAL RESPECTABILITY, WHITENESS AND A NEW “OTHER”

The uneasy tension between gay invisibility and tolerance remained normative within black communities (and to some degree still does) until on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement the black nationalism of the Black Power movement gained prominence and reinscribed respectability within a more “afrocentric” discourse. Thus by the late 1960s, Ongiri (1997) notes that the expectation to conform to binary gender roles and sexualities became principal ideologies at the core of black nationalist rhetoric which saw the black male body as the social location for racial strength, pride and advancement. Dedication to heterosexuality, family and community were characterized as reflecting not only one’s racial consciousness, but commitment to black political struggle. Within this arrangement homosexuality was seen as exogenous to the black experience, a vestige of white encounter, disruptive to black social progress, and complicit with the “white genocidal plot” (Ongiri 1997). Black nationalists, like the middle class vanguards before them, conflated black male homosexuality with femininity, weakness and “racial submission” and characterized it as a “waste of one’s manhood” (Ongiri 1997; Welsing 1991).

With the radicalization of respectability politics, terms such as “faggot” and “punk” came to epitomize this wasted manhood in urban black discourse. Riggs (1991) noted that the character of the faggot, was simply an extension of the racist image of the “sambo” or “coon,” which symbolized docile and emasculated black manhood. Thus the

“faggot” operated as an internal other, and as the “baseline transgression beyond which a Black man is no longer a man” (p. 390). Discursively, Riggs (1991) suggests, the faggot is meant to represent “weakness, passivity, the absence of real guts – balls” (390). Similarly the punk, while comparable to the faggot, portrays a conquered masculinity and complete capitulation to whiteness (Collins 2004).

The belief that homosexuality was intrinsically “a white thing” is perhaps not without some merit. Ferguson (2005) reminds us that the concept and forms of American homosexuality cannot be disconnected from the racial framework of society which has tended to both neutralize and privilege whiteness. Accordingly, Guzman (2006) and Vidal-Ortiz (2008) argue that discursive arrangements which assert sexual identity as a master status, presume that racialized bodies cannot be homosexual and tend to center whiteness within gay and lesbian discourses which structures the erasure of people of color.

In the U.S., gay homosexuality may be fancied a master status only in the context of a white existence. This affinity is indeed problematic. In this association of mutual benefit, whiteness – the race that is not one – provides the social field for the reproduction of gayness as a master status, and gayness – the homosexuality that needs to be one – affords whiteness a field where whiteness may surreptitiously (as it does best) reproduce itself as the norm (p. 94).

Ferguson (2005) also points out that mainstream gay politics have tended to presume “that homosexuality is the same in all people, [opening] it to white racial formation” (p. 62). Thus, organizing for marriage rights, military inclusion and hate crimes legislation, he argues, claims coherence with public citizenship and lays claim to forms of institutional power that are racially privileged. As a result, these politics craft a narrow view of gay sexuality that seeks access to citizenship rights through policing its gender,

racial and class boundaries (p. 61). Hence Jenness (1995) has observed that although gay and lesbian political organizing has aligned itself with race-based social movements rhetorically and ideologically,³⁴ it has nonetheless remained dominated by white men. As a result, “the more visible and institutionalized social movement organizations sustaining the gay and lesbian movement in the United States have, for the most part, remained color blind in terms of their activities and agendas” (p. 152). Adam (1995) also notes that the failure of mainstream gay and lesbian activists to incorporate racial diversity had produced a movement predicated on “hegemonies of . . . patriarchy, [and] white supremacy” (p. 177). Consequently, Han (2008) confirms that despite the belief that gay spaces are innately welcoming to people of color because of shared experiences of social marginalization and a strong public rhetoric of inclusion, “gay people of color often confront racism and racial hierarchies that mirror the straight mainstream. Accordingly, [their] counterstories ‘cast doubt on the validity of [the] accepted premise . . . that the gay community is accepting of racial minorities and that gay is not simply ‘White’” (pp. 11-12).

So while the politically charged atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s spurred gays and lesbians towards more radical activism, by the 1980s it had become evident that the public identity and political agenda they sought to develop was decidedly white. Black gays and lesbians marginalized and excluded from mainstream gay and lesbian spaces and activist priorities, began forming their own political, social

³⁴ “Gay interventions into politics in the USA often involve the deployment of an ‘ethnic’ identity; a strategy which continues in the USA . . . One of the effects and aims of such a strategy is to emphasize parallels with race-based political aims and strategies . . . [R]acial politics in Western democratic systems is primarily minority politics, based on the protection of a group who are in the numerical minority and who suffer from cultural discrimination and material and social inequalities” (Rahman 2000:18).

and advocacy groups. Groups like the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG) and the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum (“The Forum”)³⁵ began to develop a political identity and narrative for gays and lesbians of color that was largely expressed in movement goals. Among the stated objectives of these movements was achieving greater visibility for gays and lesbians of color, developing responses to black homophobia, petitioning mainstream gay and lesbian organizations to acknowledge racial diversity within the community, advocating for the inclusion of race-related issues in mainstream gay and lesbian organizing, and demanding that the inherent racism in gay and lesbian movement organizations be addressed (Boykin 2002; Brinkley 2009; D’Emilio 2002).³⁶ Thus throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, while these groups struggled to create social and political space for black gays and lesbians, much of their work mirrored previous Civil Rights efforts in targeting mainstream gay and lesbian organizations to become less racist and more inclusive in their staffing, social and political advocacy, and community outreach.

³⁵ The first national organization for African American gay rights in the U.S, NCBLG grew into a national organization from its beginnings in 1978 as a DC based organization. The Forum began as an annual education, networking, and leadership training conference for black gays and lesbians in 1987, and grew into a national organization with programs and staff.

³⁶ By most accounts (see Boykin 2002; Brinkley 2009; and D’Emilio 2002) race-based gay and lesbian organizations were successful in generating visibility and a voice for black gays and lesbians within mainstream gay politics from the late 1970s up until about 2003 when The Forum dissolved (The NCBLG had ceased functioning sometime around 1990). The downfall of these organizations can be attributed to a number of factors. In addition to political infighting, these organizations lacked access to important resources that were readily available to mainstream organizations (funding, organizational management and development knowledge, networks, or an active constituency).

OLD TALES AND NEW CHARACTERS: RESPECTABILITY, AIDS, AND THE DOWN LOW

The first documented cases of HIV in America appeared in 1981 and quickly the disease came to be associated with gay men, blacks and drugs users. This association had a huge impact on American discourses of race and sexuality generating new social stigmas, and exacerbating existing characterizations of racialized sexual deviance. Perhaps the most prominent characterization to emerge was that of the black (gay) men on the down low (DL). Illustrated in a number of highly sensationalized media and cultural accounts,³⁷ this portrayal depicted black gay men as ashamed to live openly, covert about their sexuality, and engaging in relationships with black women while having clandestine sexual encounters with men. The narrative castigates these men for spreading HIV to unsuspecting (and undeserving) black women; an idea that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports has yet to be demonstrated empirically.³⁸ Triggering black fears of sexual stigmatization and racial genocide, the DL has become the most recent justification in black communities to condemn homosexuality generally, and black gay men specifically.

While the cultural recriminations exercised against men on the DL are many (see Chapter I), the archetype draws heavily and derives much of its social power from the

³⁷ Some examples include J.L. King's book *On the Down Low*, which was featured on a 2004 episode of The Oprah Show, a 2003 essay in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Double Lives on the Down Low," and a 2005 episode of the television show Law and Order: SVU. Most of these are discussed in Chapter I.

³⁸ See *Questions and Answers: Men on the Down Low*, on the CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/resources/qa/downlow.htm>.

narrative of respectability and its ideas about authentic black manhood. While these ideas have become more important and more complex in the post-Civil Rights racial era (Collins 2004; Phillips 2005), the basic cultural investment in black manhood as the emblem of racial strength and progress has remained. Despite this, there is arguably at least one noticeable evolution in the ideal of black manhood with respect to its previous manifestations. As class-based distinctions have become a more discernable feature of black communities in America, and created a distinguishable urban underclass with its own unique cultural expressions, the concept of ideal black masculinity has begun to fracture in corresponding ways (Neal 2006). Influenced largely by hip-hop culture, poor and working class notions of ideal black manhood stress hyper-masculinity, hyper-heterosexuality, toughness and materialism and are probably most familiar to us as the pimp, playa and thug archetypes which dominate the culture as representations of black America. In contrast, middle and upper class forms of ideal black masculinity draw more from historical notions of respectability (Collins 2004; Cohen 1999; Neal 2006) and thus closely approximate Kimmel's (2005) Marketplace Man who "derive[s] his identity entirely from his success in the capitalist marketplace, as he accumulate[s] wealth, power, [and] status" (p. 84). But whereas Marketplace Man aims largely to legitimize and assert male dominance in ways that de-emphasize the importance of fatherhood and family life, for respectable, upwardly mobile black men, commitment to family and community remain important symbols of racial consciousness and commitment to social change. Therefore the upwardly mobile ideal of black manhood is expected to not just assume, but thrive in the roles of protector and provider (Welsing 1991).

A NEW COUNTERNARRATIVE?: BLACK GAY MEN CLAIMING RACE AND DEMANDING INCLUSION

By the early 1990s, HIV/AIDS had been a taken a heavy toll on an unsuspecting population. According to the CDC, by 1991, over 100,000 people had died from complications stemming from AIDS and many more had been infected (CDC 1991). Early medical and media reports had helped to stigmatize gay men, intravenous drug users, and Haitians; generate widespread fear of the disease (especially in the early years when transmission was less well understood); and do nothing to challenge the systemic paralysis over how (or whether) to respond to the disease. As a result, white gay men took to grass roots activism and organizing to secure drugs and research funding; generating new political and service organizations, cultural visibility, and much political capital (Bernstein 2002; Engel 2001). While many politically active and socially concerned black gays and lesbians participated in these efforts, they were often frustrated by the single-issue identity politics they encountered. Finding themselves marginalized within GLBT mainstream organizations, they left to form their own more radical organizations (Bernstein, 2002).³⁹

Meanwhile, the black community had responded to HIV/AIDs with silence and trepidation (Cohen 1999) which caused an already tense relationship with black gays and lesbians (manifest largely as passive tolerance and silence about issues of sexuality) to

³⁹ It should be noted that while many of these groups, like ACT UP! were incredibly diverse in many ways including race, as these groups mainstreamed, and the epidemic and political climate cooled, many of these organizations could not sustain themselves. The effort to maintain momentum was also ironically exacerbated by the groups' diversity which often made for contentious and at times untenable organizational structures (Epstein 1999).

deteriorate. This created a perfect environment for religious conservatives wishing to organize massive anti-gay political and cultural initiatives, to exploit this fracture. Groups like the Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) began actively courting black church leaders to support and advocate for anti-gay ballot initiatives in a number of states. These outreach efforts kicked off early in 1991 when the TVC started national distribution of the documentary “Gay Rights/Special Rights” to black churches. The documentary had the expressed goal of convincing the black religious community that gays and lesbians were co-opting the civil rights movement to secure “special rights” (Khan 1998). The documentary was intentionally provocative. Imagery and voice-over from Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech was edited with some of the most salacious video imagery of mostly white, affluent gay men and lesbians taken at Gay Pride events around the country. The success of the film in actually securing the support they sought lay in the fact that it played upon existing beliefs that homosexuality was not only immoral, but a white issue that was antithetical to black social justice interests (Pharr 1996). Concerned that civil rights gains and the movement’s legacy would be tarnished by an “immoral” lifestyle that was now killing people, black churches became increasingly vocal and active against homosexuality and gay political and social issues (see Cohen 1999).

In response to the racially endogamous and exogamous assaults on black gay men, during the 1990s they began to publicly express themselves in an increasingly more coherent counterstory meant to challenge the heteronormative prerequisites of respectable black masculinity, and the idea that non-heteronormative sexuality was at

odds with a commitment to racial consciousness and progress. While variations on this narrative of black gay male pride found their way into a number of popular forms of expression (fiction, film, poetry) the most widely disseminated account is that of the “same gender loving” (SGL) man.

While it is generally difficult to know the author of cultural tales, in the case of SGL, it is widely understood that the account originates in the early 1990s with Cleo Manago, a black SGL man and public health advocate. The first to refer to himself in this way, Manago advocated that other black gays and lesbians also use the term. He has claimed that SGL, in contrast to the terms “gay” or “lesbian” is a black-identified term of self respect and cultural affirmation that emphasizes same-sex relationships based on love and emotional attachment, not sex or commitment to a “gay” identity. Gay and lesbian identity, he argued, “[does] not remedy much for Black people, nor [does it] affirm us [but it does] affirm white people” (Esteem, 2007). The need for this distinction, he claimed, lay in the fact that mainstream gay and lesbian politics don’t incorporate Black interests.

Despite homophobia, HIV/AIDS, Revs. Jerry Fallwell and Pat Robertson, the Christian Right or the (President) Bushes, gays (white homosexuals) have been very successful politically, monetarily and medically as a result of their movement. On the other hand, without a gap, Black people have endured epidemics of HIV, self hate and cultural disruption that gay identity could never solve . . . Things are worse now for us, as we have relied on gay identity assimilation as a magic bullet. It has been a bullet in our foot, not to our benefit. . . [The] gay . . . movement [was] built for and in benefit to white homosexuals. Its primary beneficiaries are white, which is why ultimately, relative to Black folks, they were able to save their community from the ravages of HIV/AIDS. “Gay” has never had that impact on Black homosexuals, even among those who call themselves “gays” (Esteem 2007).

It is important to note that more than simply articulating a critique of mainstream gay

identity for its inherent racism, Manago also saw in SGL, a narrative of cultural affirmation that was not grounded in heterosexual norms. In invoking the “loving” paradigm, Manago sought to capture that aspect of black cultural politics that predicated authentic identities on the love of self, family and community as well as behaviors of sexual decorum. In this regard, SGL served as an agentic response to the discursive linkage respectability politics had created between progressive black consciousness and normative gender and sexual expressions.

Despite the existential potential created by the SGL narrative, it has not been universally adopted. While the term was originally meant to apply to both black gay men, and to black lesbians, it does not appear to have been widely embraced by black lesbians (Moore 2006) nor has it been universally embraced by black gay men. For example, among the 53 men interviewed for this study, only four men told their stories using this term. It is unclear for what reason SGL has not been embraced more widely. It begs the question whether or not black men feel if it adequately reflects their experiences, or captures who they are attempting to be in the world? Perhaps, there is an alternative narrative that better accomplishes this goal? It does seem from this effort that over the past ten years or so, a coherent narrative has begun to emerge that warrants empirical work that explores the content and purpose(s) of those stories so that we might be able to better understand the social experience of black gay men in our society.

CONCLUSION

What should be evident from this historical overview is that the cultural stories which have been and continue to be told about black gay men offer remarkable insight into how hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender and class function to organize individual and collective experience. Stories thus are powerful social phenomena that allow us access to the social structures and relationships that organize experience, social norms, and operation of power and privilege at particular historical moments.

Thinking specifically about the narratives of black gay men, it is clear that the collection of stories told about them, have and continue to facilitate distinctly different social projects of race, gender, sexuality and class hierarchy. This has created complex, and sometimes contradictory possibilities for black masculinity that have been differentially in service to white supremacy, black resistance, and mainstream gay politics. White supremacy's narrative of normalcy produced black sexual deviance in contrast to monogamous heterosexual procreativity in order to exclude all blacks from the privileges and benefits of a society predicated on racial hierarchy. In response, black resistance efforts structured the invisibility of black gays and lesbians in order to recast blacks as worthy of social inclusion. Meanwhile, mainstream gay politics have embraced whiteness as a tool for achieving full access to the privileges American society. Yet, in each of these accounts the negative and pathological portrayal of black gay men remained unchanged despite differences in story objectives, content and plot. Whether as a by-product of white supremacy, black homophobia, or gay liberation (and the gendered

norms operating within each), the marginalization and invisibility of black gay men is a direct result of not a single organizing structure, but the intersectional dynamics of race, sexuality and gender.

It is possible then to conceptualize black gay men as caught in the middle of a struggle between narratives of white supremacy (both broadly as well as within gay politics) and black counter narratives of empowerment and worthiness. In response, a self-authored narrative embracing both race and sexuality has begun to emerge and is perhaps best exemplified by discourses about being “same gender loving.” While not widely embraced, SGL nonetheless illustrates a critical moment in which black gay men have attempted to publically name and speak for themselves. But more importantly, It suggests that there is a story out there endeavoring to be told and in search of an audience. Thus, the goal of this work is to effectively capture and relate this story, and to illustrate how it is on the one hand, a reflection of the unique intersection of race, sexuality, gender and class structures and an effective counter narrative to the current portrayals of black gay men’s lived experience. To accomplish this, I explain in the following chapter the methods employed in the collection and analysis of the data for this project. This includes a brief discussion of my own relationship to the project and how my own social location influenced my methodology. The chapter also provides a detailed description of the demographic characteristics of participants.

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

I began this project in order to better understand how, in light of the collective and at times simultaneous experience of racism, homophobia and heterosexism encountered in the larger world, but also within black and gay communities, black gay men accomplish a coherent identity. In particular, I wanted to uncover the role that race played in the development of gay identity and to understand if the various social arrangements and networks that seem common to black experiences in the United States, in any way impacted the experiences and stories told by black gay men.

Early on in the research process, I noted that my own status had a unique impact on the research endeavor and required that I be particularly attentive to my “obligation” to remain objective. Thus it seems valuable that I take time to describe how I managed this by mapping out the various methodological approaches I have used in this investigation. I begin with an overview of the method used to recruit participants and collect data. Then, I present a synopsis of the men who participated in the study. I end with a discussion of the methods used to analyze this data and negotiate my own positionality within this project.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

This work utilized semi-structured, qualitative interviews for data collection.

Fifty-two interviews were conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of being black and gay, as well as the processes by which the men developed, maintained, and expressed their identities. The interview opened with exploration of each man's self-definition (racially and sexually). Then, the men were asked to "tell a story" that described how their self-definition had evolved over the course of their lives. As the men told their stories, follow-up questions were periodically asked that illuminated their experiences in the gay and black communities, perceptions of race and sexuality, and encounters with racism and homophobia. The men were encouraged to reflect upon emotional and psychological reactions to these experiences, their social meanings and what impact these experiences may have had on processes and strategies of identity construction. Also, the men were asked to contemplate what role family, religion, school, peer groups, and romantic/sexual relationships played in shaping self-definition. Follow-up questions followed the chronology of each man's narrative and were posed as necessary to aid in clarifying or enhancing the detail of the narrator's story.

Demographic data was gathered for each man interviewed. The characteristics assessed were borrowed from and measured in the same way as the 2000 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Survey of Black Gays and Lesbians. Such variables as age, education, income, occupation, parental and relationship status, the participants' hometown and current state of residence, level of participation in various communities (black, gay and black and gay) and practice of religion were captured (see Appendix).

Participants were solicited via personal networks, approaching black male

patrons at gay bars, posting fliers at businesses known to cater to a largely gay clientele, announcements posted to gay listservs, emails, partnering with gay and lesbian community groups, and snowball sampling (Noy 2008). The recruitment material established relatively broad criteria for inclusion in the study. Potential participants needed to identify as black or African American and as having relationships with other men. Anyone who contacted me with an interest in becoming involved in the project were given an overview of their potential commitment before being invited to participate in a semi-structured, in-depth interview. All interviews were conducted at times and locations agreeable to the individual participant provided that the setting was comfortable, conducive to tape recording, and appropriate for the sharing of personal information. Financial constraints meant that when possible interviews were conducted in the homes of respondents, at their workplaces, in coffee shops, in rooms reserved at a university campus or over the telephone. Approximately 31% (16) of the interviews were conducted in person. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours and were all conducted by this researcher. Informed consent and demographic information were obtained from all participants. Interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. This methodology and interview protocol was reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board.

PARTICIPANTS

During three distinct periods (the summer and fall of 2003, the summer of 2005

and the fall of 2008), I conducted interviews with a total of 52 men who self-identified as either black or African American⁴⁰ and also as someone who had romantic and intimate relationships with other men.⁴¹ Although their demographic characteristics are summarized in tables 1 and 2 below, it is useful to review them here. Overall, respondents ranged in age from 19 to 65, with 36 being the average. At the time of the interview, the men identified as having been open about their sexuality, or “out,” anywhere from 1 to over 20 years, with 15-20 years being the average. While most participants had never been married (45), and had no children (47) the majority (30) were, at the time of their interview, involved in some type of meaningful relationship (dating, committed relationship or domestic partnership). Although participants were raised in a variety of locations (small towns, large and medium sized cities) and regions (the south, mid-Atlantic, northeast, midwest, southwest and west coast), at the time of their interview, the men hailed from every region of the U.S., with the south being most represented (24), followed by the northeast (15), then the midwest (9) and finally the west coast (4).

Notably, the men were highly educated with nearly half having completed an advanced degree (17 masters and 8 terminal or professional degrees). Eleven others held a B.A., and of the remaining 16, 15 had completed one to three years of college at the time of their interview. Overwhelmingly professional, the majority of the men (30) worked in such fields as the performing arts, university teaching and administration,

⁴⁰ Of the 52 men interviewed, two identified as biracial (one as Black and Latino, the other as Black and Middle Eastern), 4 as Afro-Caribbean, and one preferred to be classified as Cape Verdean.

⁴¹ Most described themselves as gay (40), while 4 used the term “same gender loving,” 3 described themselves as bisexual and only 1 as queer. Others used a variety of self-authored labels to describe themselves. These labels can be found in Table 1.

mental health services, public health research and administration, retail management, and a variety of corporate (e.g. finance, HR, insurance, real estate, advertising) and specialty professions (e.g. law, ministry, journalism). Nine men were either advanced undergraduate, graduate or professional school students at the time of their interview; two were in entry level positions (clerical and nursing assistant) and four were either currently unemployed or retired. Accordingly, reported household incomes⁴² were relatively high -- ranging from \$10,000 to over \$100, 000 per year (eleven reported household incomes of over \$100,000 a year), with \$50,000 - \$60,000 being the average.

TABLE 1: Selected Demographic Characteristics

Variable	N
Age	
18-20	1
21-30	19
31-40	15
41-50	11
51-60	5
60+	1
Current Residence by Census Region	
Northeast	15
South	24
Midwest	9
West	4
Education Completed	
High School	1
Some College	15
B.A. or equivalent	11
M.A. or equivalent	17
Terminal or professional degree	8

⁴² Household income was assessed as the total annual earnings of all household members who pooled and shared regular, take-home wages to meet household and personal expenses on an on-going basis. This generally included live-in partners and children, but expressly excluded roommates who were only sharing living quarters and basic household expenses (i.e. rent and utilities).

TABLE 1: Continued

Variable	N
Occupational field	
University teaching/administration	9
Public health ⁴³	4
Corporate ⁴⁴	12
Professions ⁴⁵	9
Students ⁴⁶	11
Entry level ⁴⁷	3
Unemployed/retired	4
Household Income ⁴⁸	
\$0-\$10,000	1
\$10,001-\$20,000	4
\$20,001-\$30,000	10
\$30,001-\$40,000	3
\$40,001-\$50,000	3
\$50,001-\$60,000	7
\$60,001-\$70,000	3
\$70,001-\$80,000	4
\$80,001-\$90,000	3
\$90,001-\$100,000	2
> \$100,000	11
<i>No answer</i>	1
Marital Status	
Never married	45
Divorced	5
Separated	1
Married ⁴⁹	1
Current Relationship Status	
Single	22
Dating	11
Committed Relationship	16
Registered Domestic Partnership	3
Children	
Yes ⁵⁰	5
No	47

⁴³ Includes careers in research and administration.

⁴⁴ Includes careers in advertising, banking, consulting, finance, human resources, insurance, marketing, real estate, retail management, and urban planning.

⁴⁵ Includes careers in such fields as acting, corrections, counseling/psychology, journalism, law, ministry and poet.

⁴⁶ Includes advanced undergraduate (3rd and 4th year), graduate and professional school students

⁴⁷ Includes clerical and health services fields.

⁴⁸ Household size, including respondent, any live-in partners and dependents, ranged from 1 to 6, with most indicating that they lived alone (32) or with a partner (16). One participant lived with 5 related housemates who shared all household expenses.

⁴⁹ One respondent described having held a commitment ceremony with his live-in, same sex partner.

⁵⁰ Two respondents lived with two dependent children, and three lived with only one dependent child.

TABLE 1: Continued

Variable	N
Relationship to Child(ren)	
Biological Parent	2
Adoptive Parent	1
Other ⁵¹	2
Sexual Partners	
Women and men equally	1
Mostly men, some women	4
Exclusively with men	47
Sexual Identity	
Gay	40
Bisexual	3
Queer	1
Same Gender Loving (SGL)	4
Other ⁵²	4
Years “out”	
0-1 years	1
1-5 years	6
5-10 years	13
10-15 years	11
15-20 years	5
20 + years	15
No answer	1

Participants’ reported level of involvement in local gay, black, and black and gay communities ranged from “not at all” to “extremely.” On average, participants were moderately involved in all three communities with their greater level of involvement being in local black communities, and the lowest level of involvement being in local black and gay communities. Over half of the men (28) characterized themselves as Christian (Baptist, AME, Catholic and Pentecostal). Ten others characterized themselves as non-Christian (Buddhist, Jewish and Spiritual), with the remainder (14) being

⁵¹ In two cases, participants were parenting children that who were technically their nieces/nephews.

⁵² Respondents whose self-chosen identities did not fit in any other category used the following labels: “Person who loves/sleeps with who I love/sleep with,” “Attracted to men,” “Same gender attracted,” and “Me.”

agnostic/atheist or unsure of their preferred religious affiliation. Thus, attendance at religious services ranged from “never” to “more than once a week” with “several times a year” being the most common response. Frequency of prayer ranged from “never” to “several times a day” with “several times a week” being the most common response.

TABLE 2: Community Characteristics

Variable	N
Religious affiliation	
Christian ⁵³	23
Buddhist	3
Jewish	1
Other ⁵⁴	10
Agnostic/Atheist	12
Don't Know	3
Attends religious services	
More than once a week	7
Once a week	7
2-3 times a month	4
Once a month	3
Several times a year	12
Once a year	6
Never	9
Don't know	1
N/A	3
Prayer	
Several times a day	15
Once a day	9
Several times a week	11
Once a week	2
Less than once a week	4
Never	6
Don't know	3
N/A	2

⁵³ Includes such Christian denominations as AME, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, Pentacostal, Protestant, and Unitarian, and MCC.

⁵⁴ Respondents in this category preferred to define themselves as “spiritual”

TABLE 2: Continued

Variable	N
Involvement in a LGBT community	
Extremely	5
Quite a bit	15
Moderately	13
A little	8
Slightly/not at all	11
Involvement in a Black community	
Extremely	7
Quite a bit	12
Moderately	18
A little	8
Slightly/not at all	7
Involvement in a Black, LGBT community	
Extremely	8
Quite a bit	5
Moderately	11
A little	9
Slightly/not at all	19

ANALYSIS

After each interview, the recording of the interview was reviewed. Sections that offered insight into the subject's awareness of the social structures that shaped their experience, illuminated the circumstances under which they encountered these structures, the strategies by which they negotiated them, or revealed motivations for their responses were transcribed verbatim. To be sure that all usable data was transcribed, each tape was reviewed multiple times.

In the transcripts, all participants are identified by pseudonyms. I found it noteworthy that during the interviews, I initially asked each man to select his own pseudonym as a part of the formal interview protocol. Several men expressed discomfort

with this request stating that the use of a pseudonym, for them, implied that they held some level of shame about their lives as gay men, and therefore they refused to provide one. After four or more experiences like this, I elected to omit this request from the formal protocol, and simply provided the men with pseudonyms at the time of transcription.⁵⁵

As an item of data, Ewick and Silbey (1995) suggest that “narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world that are flattened or silenced by . . . more traditional methods of social science . . . [as] social identities and social action, indeed all aspects of the social world, are storied” (p. 199). Accordingly, a sociology of narrative sees stories as reflective of and grounded in the social structure (Plummer 1995:167), and as representative of the “processes by which people construct and communicate their understandings of the world” (Ewick & Silbey 1995:202). Social scientists who work with narratives outline several methodological approaches for analyzing the social organization of stories (e.g. Ewick & Sibley 1995; Gubrium & Holstein 1997; Loseke 2007; Plummer 1995). Plummer’s (1995), four questions, used in his analysis of sexual stories, offer a particularly useful analytic strategy. He suggests that stories can be investigated for their structure. Unpacking how a story is organized (e.g. plot and timing), its genre, themes and metaphors can reveal the operation of more generic social processes and structures in the same way that counter stories used in critical race theory situate the anecdotal within the broader structure of racial hierarchy. Second, narrative can be analyzed for the processes by which a story is produced and

⁵⁵ I believe that these reactions suggest something about the nature of the men’s identity work that I will explore more fully in subsequent chapters.

eventually consumed. Understanding why and how a story comes to be told, how persons come to take personal ownership of a story, who is the intended audience, and how that audience is expected to and/or actually hears the story can shed light on those social factors which facilitate or impede the telling of a story, or force it to be told in a particular way. Third, stories can be investigated for the social role they play.

According to Plummer (1995), stories can either help to maintain dominant social orders or resist and transform them. Ewick and Silbey (1995) characterize these narrative forms as hegemonic tales and subversive stories and for this reason argue that narratives are not neutral, but are overtly political phenomenon intentionally mobilized for strategic ends (See also Loseke 2007). Finally, stories can be evaluated for their context. Stories are not randomly told. The institutional, historical and interactional contexts in which they emerge generate the very resources to enable their telling, shape their telling, affect their meaning, and influence their impact (Ewick and Silbey 1995, Plummer 1995). Uncovering the link between a particular story and broader social forces of change and history can illuminate why and how a story comes to be told as a specific historical moment. For these reasons, authors have asserted that various narrative forms are interrelated, such that personal narratives are produced using an existing array of cultural, institutional and organizational narratives which reflect contemporary understandings of how the world does and should work (Loseke, 2007). These broader stories define what is within the bounds of “intelligibility, relevance, and believability; . . . specify what serves as validating responses or critical rejection; . . . [and ultimately render] personal narratives interpretable” (Ewick and Silbey 1995:207).

Using Plummer's framework, this project endeavors to answer four critical questions regarding the narratives told by those black gay men participating in this project. These questions inherently expose the natural interplay among various narrative forms allowing one to best understand "how [these] narrative identit[ies] work and the work [these] narrative identities do" (Loseke 2007:663). Because I am interested in what social structures and processes are implicated in black gay men's identity narratives, I analyzed the men's stories for statements, metaphors, themes or tropes that directly or indirectly reveal existing structures (e.g. discourses, ideologies, practices) of race or sexuality. As an intersectional project, I examined their stories for both independent and linked accounts of these formations as well as for how these formations also implicate structures of gender, class or nation. In this way, I was able to identify the hierarchical social relations implicated in black gay men's identity work. Second, to clarify the intended audience for these stories of black gay male identity, I assessed the content and meaning of each man's story for explicit and implicit references as to its intended audience. As personal narrative is fundamentally a social project, identifying who was meant to hear and interpret these stories can clarify those forces that help shape the way these particular stories were presented. Third, to demonstrate the social role played by black gay men's stories of identity, I looked at the ways these stories either helped to maintain or resisted and transformed the dominant order and attempted to understand whether these were hegemonic tales or subversive stories. This required considering their stories in terms of the dominant racial, sexual, gender, and class hierarchies, as well as acknowledging the possibility that their stories could be classified as accomplishing

more than one political objective. Finally, to describe how black gay men's stories of identity are reflective of the cultural and historical moment in which they emerge, I examined the structural forces that appeared to contribute to the construction of these men's stories. In conjunction with understanding the social role these stories play, this insight should make clear how this post civil rights, post-queer moment has produced a particular story about black gay men's lives.

POSITIONALITY

While I do not claim to have produced a feminist project, navigating my own complicated relationship to this research led me to embrace an aspect of feminist research practice. In general, feminist research offers a challenge to patriarchal bias in the various domains of knowledge production (e.g. epistemology and methodology) and thus actively seeks to equalize power dynamics between researchers and subjects, advance the standpoint and experience of women, and promote social change (Taylor 1998). Viewing all knowledge as politically situated, the feminist project emphasizes the role of the researcher and his or her impact on research processes and outcomes (Moras 2007). This approach has particular importance for qualitative projects that employ narrative data sources (Pierce & Maynes 2005). As Plummer (1995) noted, the process of gathering and coaxing of stories will inevitably lead those stories to be told in particular ways by virtue of the researcher's questions, style and theoretical perspective (p. 21). For reasons such as this, feminist scholars are skeptical of claims of objectivity,

seeing the production of “objective” research as a less realistic goal than the effort to honestly identify how one influences the work they produce (Fonow & Cook 1991; Taylor 1998).

In this project, my own statuses and perspectives undoubtedly impacted the project design, implementation and outcomes. My training in the sociological study of race, my identity as a black gay man, my past encounters with racism and homophobia, my experiences of alienation from black and gay communities, and my strong opinions about the social factors that I believe produced these experiences undoubtedly became interwoven with the questions I asked, the narratives I received, and my interpretations of the participants’ content and meaning. Since it was impossible to escape or ignore these influences, the feminist research practice of positionality offered a useful methodology for meaningfully addressing them. Positionality, as a methodological practice, views the researcher’s social location as a potential source of both bias and insight in research. As a result, researchers are expected to be acutely aware and articulate the ways in which their subjective experience impacts the choice of topic; project design; power and status negotiations in data gathering; and interpretations of the data (Deutsch 2004; Moras 2007).

Since I could not produce a representation of black gay men’s lives as a detached “other,” I elected to openly use my own statuses in useful ways. Trained primarily as a race scholar, I had to work much harder to understand and appropriately capture the intricate dynamics of sexuality, gender and ultimately class in participants’ narratives as easily as I was able to acknowledge the dynamic of race. This required deep reflection

on my own assumptions, concerted efforts to delve into the feminist and sexualities literatures, and the advice and insight of scholars better versed in sex and gender scholarship. I elected to be “out” to each of the participants, and my openness seemed to encourage participants to give me extraordinary access. Sometimes they agreed to answer questions well past our allotted time. There was an ever present tension between my desire for objectivity and the impulse to interpret participants’ experiences through my own. At times, the similarities in our personal stories allowed me easier access to their experiences and meanings as the feelings, experiences and ideas we held in common helped to facilitate connection as well as conversation. Where our experiences did not overlap, or something in the data eluded me, our connection made it easy to ask questions, verbalize my assumptions, or invite participants to theorize along with me and this would help bring clarity and greater understanding to our discussions.

Embracing this feminist methodology also freed me to openly acknowledge the more political objectives of this work (Madriz 2000). Because narratives inherently give voice – and through giving voice, the opportunity for liberation (Ewick & Silbey 1995) – my goal is to give voice to a historically marginalized and silenced narrative within mainstream black and gay communities and thereby disrupt the prevailing construction of black gay men as “deviant other.” In so doing, I attempt to legitimate race and sexuality as an important element of social science investigation.

CHAPTER V

THE STRATEGIC DEPLOYMENT OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY: THE SUBVERSIVE STORY OF THE SUPER BLACK MAN

Given the prominent role that gender plays in existing narratives about black gay men, it is not surprising that black manhood was one of the most recurrent themes to emerge from the participants' interviews. Their accounts of navigating social expectations of masculinity offer valuable insights into how gender interacts with race and sexuality both structurally and interpersonally. Participants' specific interpretations of the stock story of black manhood note that the narrative accomplishes more than a simple reproduction of the binary gender order. It generates a prescriptive account of race as it has been organized by black counternarratives of white supremacy. Hence, it was particularly interesting to observe how the participants' accounts both reified and challenged existing discourses of race, gender and sexuality in interesting and complex ways as they produced a counternarrative that responded to some of the most problematic narratives about black gay men.

In this chapter, I demonstrate these complexities in participant's narratives of black gay manhood. I offer these accounts as more than just simple illustrations of their self conscious constructions. I also aim to illuminate the structural forces they rely upon to produce these accounts, particularly the social arrangements of race, class, gender and sexuality these accounts both embody and challenge. What I found most interesting about the participants' stories were the frequent references to a strategically deployed

hegemonic masculine form I call the "Super Black Man" (SBM). Their descriptions of being SBM were used to counteract the heteronormative, and hypermasculine perquisites of respectable black masculinity. The SBM archetype achieves their redemption by constructing them as racially-conscious, respectable men who are also committed to racial uplift. But more than redemptive, their descriptions of performing this exaggerated form of hegemonic masculinity also appeared to support a decidedly racial project. So for the narrators, being or becoming a SBM is not only a direct challenge to effeminizing, pathological, and racially self-hating portrayals of black male homosexuality, but situates gay male identity squarely within the black experience.

To explore these dynamics, I begin with demonstrating the inherent reflexivity of their narrative accounts. I focus on participants' descriptions of their self-conscious negotiations of the normative race, gender and sexuality scripts that produce their erasure. Second, I explore the participants' narrative efforts to generate distance between themselves and the archetype of the weak, effeminate black gay man. Third, I explore both the content and structural resources of their SBM narratives in order to illuminate how participants use it in a redemptive capacity. I close with some analytical reflections on these findings in which I discuss how the participants' story of gender functions as a subversive story of contemporary black masculinity. I also contemplate the inherent paradox of using a hegemonic form of masculinity in a counter narrative about the heteronormative aspects of black manhood. Finally, I consider what insights this account of black gay manhood tells us about the structural interplay of race, gender, sexuality and class in our society.

NARRATIVE REFLEXIVITY AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

As already described, personal accounts are an inherently reflexive undertaking. Social actors rely on existing stories to construct a convincing and coherent story of their own lives, interpret their own troubles and experiences, or make meaning of the world in which they live. In this way, narratives are said to mediate the relationship between daily social interaction and large-scale social structures (Ewick and Sibley, 1995), and as a result, storytelling can occur in incredibly self-conscious and methodical ways.

Such dynamics are so intrinsic to the process of storytelling that even scholars working outside of the narrative tradition have identified reflexive practices in personal accounts. For example, Green (2002) observed reflexive moments in the sexual identity work of gay men. In commenting on Connell's depictions of "very straight gay males" Green noted how uneasily, clumsily, and unwittingly the participants negotiated prevailing scripts of hegemonic masculinity alongside their sexuality. Ultimately, he found that while their personal narratives were informed by stock stories of masculinity, they ultimately neither simply reproduced, nor spectacularly disrupted the existing gender order but engaged a self-conscious process of negotiation (p. 539). Carrington's (2008) work illustrates a parallel dynamic among black cricket players in the U.K. His study found that the players engaged in intentional, self-conscious acts of hegemonic masculinity as a cultural practice of racial contestation. The players performed hegemonic masculinity through body size, physical dexterity and athletic ability in order to advance a dominant performance of masculinity in response to the emasculating

effects of white racism. While not uniformly endorsed, users were aware of the strategic, temporary and limited use of these demonstrations. What was perhaps most interesting about Carrington's study is that it reveals the intricacies of the reflexive practices inherent to personal narration. Not only do storytellers produce narratives by drawing upon socially constructed accounts of race, sexuality and gender (in this instance), they do so in ways that are thoughtful, self conscious, situational and selective.

It was relatively easy to locate similarly reflexive dynamics within these men's stories. Most could easily recall the prescriptive social narratives that guided their own storytelling efforts as well as the social projects those narratives supported. For example, "Krishna," an advertising professional in his early thirties, noted the existence of a dominant racial narrative that prescribes certain performances of blackness which he has found to be untenable:

I think Black people are so incredibly marginalized in this country in terms of what we . . . believe we can do. How we're supposed to speak. How we're supposed to talk. How we're supposed to dress. What music we're supposed to listen to. What kinds of jobs we're supposed to have. What kind of cars we drive. And we've believed it. We believe it now. We now perpetuate that sort of thinking. This very small thinking, and it's really, really sad. So every day I try to fight those ideas of who I think I'm supposed to be.

Krishna lists a number of cultural and class-based signifiers (speaking, dress, talk, music, cars, and jobs) as performative requirements of blackness. While his verbal cues ignore sexuality and are vague regarding masculinity, he is nonetheless aware of these racialized expectations, and how they intrude upon his sense of self and so he desires to challenge them. Other narrators were more specific in their assessments of the particular cultural forms they regularly negotiated. Critical of the forms black masculinity that

have become characteristic of black, urban America, “Bernard,” a business manager in his forties, offers the following critique:

My nose is wide and my lips are pretty big; and just like Toni Morrison says, I’m 8-rock⁵⁶. But I don’t get Ambi⁵⁷ or do the Michael Jackson bleaching cream to bleach myself . . . Be who you are, but as long as you cosign what other people say about you, you validate that. You can’t cosign that . . . A group of Fubu-clad, young Black men go into the mall. When they go into the mall in a group with some very loud intimidating clothes, regardless of what their intentions are, Archie and Edith Bunker are going to look at them like a gang and they are gonna steal . . . And a lot of them don’t know that one Black man is a homeless person., but two Black men, and three Black men is a gang. That’s how they see us . . . You go to the mall with your Fubu pants hanging off your ass you cosign everything they think about you. You act ignorant out in public you cosign. [Y]ell it across the mall or put it in your songs, [and] you cosign that. Then when they say it you try and get offended? You have no right to get offended. No right whatsoever.

He goes on to say:

[It’s] just a lack of pride, [and] a lack of not know[ing] where you’ve been . . . [W]e just don’t know. We don’t know what nigger means! These kids, they take that, they don’t know what that means. They say it. Every rap record says it. Every rap record got “bitch.” I think calling the pillar of society, Black women, bitches . . . and these young Black women like it! “Oh I like that.” “Bitch you fine.” “Oh they love it.” And they just don’t know. They just don’t know. These kids just don’t know.

Referencing the shape of his nose, the size of his lips and his refusal to bleach his skin, Bernard invokes an ideology of race consciousness that celebrates dark skin and “traditionally” African countenance as emblematic of racial pride (Welsing 1991). He narratively places this sense of racial pride in opposition to uncritical use of the N-word, misogynist rap lyrics (and the men and women who like them) and the Fubu (a

⁵⁶ 8-rock is a reference from Toni Morrison’s book *Paradise*. The author narrates a town (Paradise) entirely inhabited by Black people where the highest status is reserved for the darkest-skinned people, who are considered racially pure. They are called “8 rock.”

⁵⁷ Ambi is a bleaching cream, at one time popular within the US Black community, used to lighten and make uniform (in color), dark, blotchy skin.

contemporary, urban Black clothing line) style worn by some young, working class, urban black men. Bernard's concerns are easily traced to the politics of respectability where propriety and the protection of Black women's sexuality are stressed as important elements of racial consciousness and progress (Summers 2004; Welsing 1991). Bernard basically seeks to distance himself from this aggressive, hyper masculine working-class ideal of black manhood, and accomplishes this by invoking the gaze of "Archie and Edith Bunker." His use of this archetype for the average white American (and the white racial frame with which they see the world) implies not only his disapproval, but highlight his conviction that urban, working class performances of black masculinity – or the thug – are reductive reifications of anti-Black stereotypes that are reminiscent of Russell's (1998) *criminalblackman*.⁵⁸

Participants' self-conscious negotiations were not confined to scripts of race. Some personal narratives explored the unnamed whiteness noted to exist at the core of mainstream gay identity. Such reflections were common among those participants who identified as "same gender loving (sgl),"⁵⁹ and their insightful commentary illuminated the influence of intersecting structures of race and sexuality on their day to day experiences and identity work. For example, "John" a sgl man and a public health researcher in his late twenties stated:

I describe myself as a same gender loving man. That is my definition if you will. It's a description of my sexual orientation through the prism of race. So for me, my understanding of my sexual orientation cannot be separated from my race. Other language that people use, like gay specifically, calls forth a political and a

⁵⁸ The *criminalblackman* is a trope identified by Russell (1998) which reflects the general construction of black masculinity as pathological, violent and dangerous.

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that while criticisms of mainstream gay identity and politics were common among participants, endorsement or use of sgl narrative or identity was not.

discursive perspective that privileges white, middle class men. So, I don't go for gay at all.

In addition, "Keith" a single man and university faculty member in his late thirties elaborates on how prevailing narratives of black masculinity help to organize white masculinity as not only subordinate to black manhood, but as analogous to black homosexuality.

I have come to believe that in black community, homosexual or gay in particular also equals white . . . black masculinity when I was growing up was defined by overt . . . [and] white boys do not behave that way . . . [So] . . . anything less than exaggerated masculinity . . . gets coded as a masculinity that would be acceptable in a white skin . . . and it's what homosexuality that is you know not quite as out there as the more the feminine representation looks like in Black skin.

John's description of being same gender loving reveals an inextricable link between race and sexuality in that race served as the context within which his sexuality is shaped. As a result, the white norms of mainstream gay identity are both evident and difficult for him to accept as someone who is so fundamentally connected to his blackness. Moreover, Keith's narrative provides insight into the interactive and mutually constructing dynamics of race, gender and sexuality in his day to day identity work. His narrative also helps clarify the various social projects implicated in the complex array of narratives invoked by his personal account. So for example, in the same way that white racial narratives rely on the construction and denigration of black male and female sexualities (although in different ways) in order to both define whiteness and generate white supremacy, Keith reveals how certain black counternarratives of white supremacy appear to employ similar dynamics. His account of empowered black masculinities that have agentially created within the black communities he grew up in, divulges how such

stories contrast hypermasculine accounts of black manhood with constructions of whiteness as a subordinated or effeminized masculinity in order to denigrate black homosexuality.⁶⁰ While Keith is silent as to the source of this narrative, it is not implausible to speculate that it has its roots in white racist claims about black physical strength and endurance (prominent narratives used in support of the abuse of black labor under slavery and Jim Crow); as well as in black reactions to the historical exploitation of this labor. Accounts of black men's superior athletic prowess which pervade American sports (and popular culture) are perhaps the best contemporary example of both the historical evolution and enduring nature of this narrative.

It is also impossible to ignore the heteronormative and hyper masculine signifiers in Keith's account of black manhood. So whereas heterosexuality operates within whiteness to produce white supremacy (Carter 2007; Sommerville 2000); it is also used to support a masculine project that is meant to subvert that racial norm. Kimmel (2005) has suggested that homophobia and the repudiation of femininity are central to the organization of American manhood where they serve to generate social distance from effeminacy and to mask fears of emasculation. In this instance, that account is invoked, and then exaggerated in order to distinguish black manhood from white manhood, and to assert that it is somehow manlier. In this way black manhood is exonerated from its typically onerous reputation.

Krishna, Bernard and Keith highlight the kinds of ongoing, discursive

⁶⁰ It's notable that this account is identical to what Carrington (2008) found among black cricket players who remediated their subordinate masculinity via performances of hypermasculinity. Their efforts to "prove" themselves to be tougher, faster

negotiations that are central to their identity work as black gay and SGL men. In their personal accounts they not only reference and draw from broader scripts about race, sexuality, class and gender; they self-consciously draw upon these stories and the projects they support, in order to agentially narrate the experience of their own social location. These reflexive dynamics appear central to an overall effort to resist imposed subjectivities of racial and sexual subordination that leave them vulnerable to white supremacy, or undermine their integration and recognition within black communities as racially conscious, black men. These complex negotiations establish the context in which gender gets used as the canvas to produce a counter narrative to these hegemonic tales. The following section examines their efforts to generate social distance from narratives of effeminized masculinity and provides greater insight into their narrative process.

“NOT A PUNK FAGGOT”

As described earlier, in black communities the punk and faggot archetypes draw upon stereotyped accounts of gay masculinities as effeminate, weak, aimless and inauthentically black. Painfully aware of this, participants were eager to dissociate from this construction. The effort to accomplish this distancing were never contingent upon or related to the narrators own self presentation. Narrators who were gender conforming, those who were not, and those who were somewhere in between, universally despised this characterization of weakness even as they acknowledged the fluidity of their own

gender presentations.⁶¹ “Matt,” an educational administrator in his late thirties, provided an account of how males thought to be gay were viewed in the black community in which he grew up and helps to illuminate a generally held attitude about black gay men within black communities:

At the time . . . it was clear that they were soft . . . We didn’t call them gay . . . The older folks said “funny.” Folks my age just said “faggot.” So whatever it was they were, it was anti-male and so that was a problem. Now, I look back and I lump that together with misogyny . . . [T]he problem with feminine, or effeminate black men is that [it’s] close to black women; which are [sic] not as good as, not as valued as black men. So it’s femininity that’s a problem. Because it’s not as if anybody every saw them do anything with anybody. So it was the outward manifestation of femininity in a male body that was disgusting to the community.

Reflecting on his upbringing, Matt specifies one of the ways that gender structures the faggot narrative. Describing the archetype’s connection to softness and femininity, Matt explains that it is this juxtaposition of female qualities and male persona that was despised in his childhood community. Referring to such men as “funny,” “anti-male” and “a problem,” Matt confirms that the faggot occupies a social location where the “natural” gender order is believed to have been disrupted. It is also a location where men are thought to have abdicated their social standing by inappropriately mimicking characteristics associated with women who hold a relatively devalued status in society. While the subordination of women is not unique to blacks, the linkage of black homosexuality with not just feminine qualities but the actual subordinated status of women, particularly black women, reflects an analysis frequently raised by black feminists. While it may seem peculiar that racial justice projects would, by design, have

⁶¹ That is, those who were not gender conforming in noticeable ways.

disproportionate benefits by gender (or sexuality) since knowledge about the nature of inequality has been thought to inspire empathy and activism regarding other forms of inequality (see Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001), scholars have noted a tendency for racial justice movements to construe racial justice in terms of improved social opportunities for black men (see Betsch-Cole & Guy-Sheftall 2003; Cohen 1999; Collins 2000; Ongiri 1997; Smith 1998). Cohen (1999) has explained that these dynamics result from the framing of gender and sexuality issues as cross-cutting issues within black antiracist politics. Such issues are seen as potentially divisive because they disproportionately impact only certain segments of the community. As a result, these issues are subordinated to consensus issues which are seen as impacting the entire community equally. Thus, the day to day practices that support the subordination of gender and sexuality issues within black communities do not simply emerge from ideological arrangements, but are systematically organized and mobilized as a strategic resource of specific antiracist projects. Related to these structural politics, Xavier” a senior academic administrator in his late thirties provides additional insight into the structures that facilitate the juxtaposition of black male homosexuality and femininity.

I see one of the main reasons why the black community has such issues with gay men in the black community is because there’s this notion that we’ve already been de-masculinized as men in America. So why would you then want to take on quote-unquote “the characteristic” of getting fucked. That’s what it’s basically boils down to.

Xavier’s comments add to our understanding of the social organization of the “faggot” narrative because they invoke sexuality more specifically. Being a “faggot,” as the story goes, is about more than a failure to conform to masculine gender norms. The narrative

produces the marginalization of black gay men by appropriating the sexual attitudes and mores of black communities. Xavier specifically highlights the exclusive association of black male homosexuality with the receptive sexual position. Taking on what is presumed to be the feminine sexual role is interpreted as an emasculation and degradation of not only those individuals, but of all black gay men. Many scholars look to the black church to understand black attitudes about sex and sexuality (Cohen 1999; Collins 2004). They suggest that black churches have tended to embrace a white racial framing of Christian theology that sees the body as separate from, and an impediment to true spirituality (Butler 2004; Douglas 2004; Griffin 2004b). In this framework, the body is the site of passion (not reason) which is associated with femininity (Douglas 2004), immorality (Butler 2004) and the absence of self-love (Griffin 2004b). Thus the narrative conflation of the black male homosexual with sexual passivity and weakness is organized by systems of race and sexuality as they are manifest within black religious ideology. Within that ideology, dichotomies and distinctions of sacred and profane, public and private, strength and weakness are written on the body as expressions of ideal spirituality, commitment to racial justice and to the generativity of black family life (Anderson 2004). This arrangement reveals another instance of the paradoxes of stock stories and their counternarratives. While traditional notions of white supremacy have used the black body as the vehicle for articulating racist ideology, black counternarratives also appear to be written on the body where they draw upon ideologies of race, sexuality and gender to frame black antiracist strategy.

“Michael” is the director of research for a large community based agency

providing mental health and other services for abused children in his early forties. His understanding of black manhood speaks to these antiracist organizing structures at the heart of the black homophobic attitudes.

I grew up an understanding that being a black man meant that you had to be involved with a black woman, have black children and a black family and that was connected to a larger political struggle.

Having grown up on the east coast during the period of radical black activism (late 1960s/early 1970s), Michael references the black –authored racial ideologies of that time as having shaped his understanding of black manhood as both heterosexual and procreative. By situating his interpretation of black masculinity within organized, black antiracist efforts, Michael provides useful information. Scholars of social movements have long theorized that movement organizations play an important role in linking individual interpretative frames to broader social (and organizational) narratives (Snow et al. 1986). Social movement organizations strategically devise and disseminate specific interpretations of cultural narratives that “enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their [lives] . . . by rendering [those] events or occurrences meaningful” (Snow et al. 1986:464). In other words, movement organizations not only provide meaningful interpretations of relevant life events, but story these interpretations in ways that appeal to the values, beliefs, and experiences of selected audiences. By generating a shared perspective on the causes for and necessary responses to particular social issues, movement organizations mobilize people into action, and facilitate collective identity (Snow & Benford 1988). Individuals utilize these interpretive frames to evaluate who is and who is not a member of the collective (Hunt et al. 2004). While I

have consistently noted the role of black antiracist projects in the production of this stock account, acknowledging its social movement functions helps to clarify its more structural nature. This provides added empirical support for Feagin's (2000) claim that organized resistance is an inherent feature of the structural manifestation of race.

Acknowledging the social movement functions of the antiracist rhetorics at the heart of stories of black masculinity not only reveals the structural influences on the narrative, but makes evident the role that race places in the production of the hegemonic tale and the corresponding counternarrative detailing the authenticity of black gay manhood.

Twenty-three year-old "Kanye," who was unemployed and living with his parents at the time of his interview, in expressing the following view of effeminate black gay men, confirms not only the effort to put distance between themselves and the faggot narrative,⁶² but illustrates the prominent role that race plays in organizing his narrative account:

[T]here's so many flaming black guys and it's ridiculous how they come out busting out of the closet like, "Hey girl here I am!" It doesn't have to be all that. I think a lot of the feminine guys really put it bad on us because when [people see them] they think, "Oh he's gay . . . [so flaming that he will] start wearing wigs! Is he going to start doing shows?" You know, stuff like that. And it just gives us sometimes a bad name, "Oh yea, so now he's gay, and so now he's this punk." I don't like that . . . Yeah I mean just because . . . there's a lot of feminine black guys out there . . . [people may be] . . . taken aback, [and won't stop to think,] "Oh well maybe all of them aren't feminine with that flamboyant attitude."

Kanye narratively establishes the transgressive boundary Riggs (1991) references. For Kanye, men who are "flamboyant," "flaming," refer to one another using "girl," are so

⁶² It is worth noting that Kanye's remarks here are just one aspect of his view of effeminate black gay men. In an earlier portion of his interview, he heralds the courage of effeminate black men for fully expressing themselves in defiance of expected gender norms.

over the top that they literally “burst out of the closet,” and presumably wish to be seen as women (“will start wearing wigs”); are the “punks” that give all gay men a bad name in the black community. His comments are reminiscent of Matt’s mention of the juxtaposition of masculine bodies and feminine characteristics being reviled in black communities. Ultimately, transgression of a gender line is conflated with a complete capitulation to femininity and an impotent masculinity. Kanye is clear that he does not wish to be construed as a punk; but also that he experiences this understanding black gay manhood as a black racial narrative. Later in the same interview, Kanye adds to his characterization of the punk/faggot:

[My friends] . . . went to school here and . . . and [another friend] was [also] going to school here at the time. [Another friend] worked here while he was going to school. I looked up to them I was like they’re gay, they’re Black but they’re doing something [with] themselves. They’re not all this stereotypical gay. I hadn’t seen that [before]. It was so amazing and . . . [it] really empowered me to be me. I could still be gay and I can still go to school and do this and do that.

Kanye expresses relief and amazement at meeting black gay men who were “doing something with themselves,” and this revelation appears to empower him. He interprets it as a signal that his sexuality need not interfere with his middle class aspirations for a college education and career. He also comments on an additional aspect of the faggot/punk archetype, that of the aimless and unproductive male. Kanye’s fear that his sexuality will cost him a productive and purposeful life has strong connections to the narrative of respectability which constructs black gay men as having failed to be (re)productive citizens, and are therefore threatening to black social progress.

The punk and faggot archetypes exemplify the uniquely marginal location of Black gay men. Both constructions rely on white supremacist discourses that discredit

black sexualities and masculinities, and also on black, anti-racist discourses that question black gay men's commitment to respectability, racial pride and social progress.

Accordingly, what appears largely to be a gendered narrative or even one about sexuality is in fact, a hegemonic tale ostensibly structured by racial hierarchy. Yet despite the complexity of hierarchical structures that organize black gay men's marginal position, they have produced a compelling counternarrative that utilizes gender in a strategic and intentional act of resistance. In challenging the conventional construction of black gay manhood, the narrators demonstrate agency in their self production while also disrupting the discursive regimes that presume their inability to be simultaneously homosexual and racially conscious men. In the following section, we explore the Super Black Man narrative they produce for this purpose.

PRODUCING SUPER BLACK MEN

As they described the experience of being or becoming a Super Black Man (SBM), participants related their transcendence over their existing social location, staked their claim to respectability, asserted their manhood and demonstrated their racial consciousness. "DJ," a 37 year old black gay man, provides a poignant characterization of the effort to become a SBM:

What was more important to me was that I could go out and make a lot of money. Because I wasn't looking for somebody else who was gonna do it for me . . . I felt like I could do it myself. I thought . . . I couldn't have a part of the American dream because I'm black, short, gay . . . [B]ecause all of that was going on, I had to be bigger, stronger, faster, and better. So, it always encouraged me to do my best and to be better. I had to do extra -- study four languages and

excel in chemistry, and know biology backwards and forwards . . . I tried to rise above it (being gay) . . . It affected me to try to excel, to try to be better.

DJ views his race, sexuality and even his stature as impediments to attaining the

“American Dream; a goal he defines in terms of money, success and status.

Notwithstanding the fact that the narrative of “The American Dream” is in and of itself a white-authored narrative that contributes to a colorblind view of race in America (Feagin 2000; Madriaga 2005), DJ’s perception that he is alienated from this ambition is so great, that he expends extraordinary effort in external displays of achievement (knowledge of four languages, and excellence in the traditionally male dominated physical sciences) to overcome his perceived shortcomings (stature, race, sexuality), DJ posits no alternative but to remake himself into the ideal man financially, physically and intellectually. Notably his desire to make himself “bigger, stronger, faster, and better” is borrowed nearly verbatim from the opening sequence of the 1970s television drama, *The Bionic Man*, in which an average man, with the aid of technology is literally made into a super man. Ultimately, his account of being “the best” aspires to achieve a professional and cultural excellence that is reminiscent of a politics of respectability which emphasized professional success and appropriated white cultural norms.

“Jamie” is a Black gay man in his mid forties also credits SBM performances for helping him compensate for his marginal statuses:

That’s what you got to do as a Black person; you gotta work twice as hard. Do all that stuff! Certainly [and] I know that [it’s] doubled because as a gay person, you’ve got to be the best at everything because when they find out, what will keep you there is that they find you indispensable. So I find myself trying to be the best little boy in the world. Sometimes taking [on] more than I ever needed to be taking on or should be taking on.

Jamie credits working “twice as hard,” doing “all that stuff,” “taking on more than he should,” and being “the best little boy in the world” for the professional success he seems to value, and for extenuating the impact of his marginal social positions. His compensatory performances mimic Marketplace Manhood, in their emphasis on power and status in work and career. These sentiments are echoed by “Brad” a 43 year old public health researcher from the northeast when discussing his teenage years:

I got involved with student leadership, and that really sort of began this whole sort of best little boy in the world. There was always sort of that piece of it, I got good grades for the most part, and then by the time I got to high school particularly like the end of my sophomore year, I was doing really well in school and started getting active in student leadership, and started being just sort of compulsively overachieving. And some of that had to do with the fact that I just felt like that was somehow compensating for being gay.

For Brad, investing time in leadership activities as well as getting good grades in school were signs of “overachievement.” His pursuit of competence in these areas is consistent with the Marketplace Man trope and the overall achievement orientation associated with American masculinity (Kimmel 2005). That he sees the activity as “compulsive” signals the depth of his commitment to these behaviors as a way to “compensate for being gay.” Ultimately, the behaviors for him were meant to mediate the stigma he experienced for being gay. Yet, it is both Jamie’s and Brad’s claims to being “the best little boy in the world,” that is particularly telling. This reference is to the book *The Best Little Boy in the World* published in 1973 by then closeted writer, Andrew Tobias. In this loosely autobiographical memoir, Tobias imparts numerous anxieties about his sexuality. He is uncomfortable with sexual activity, cannot kiss another man, discuss certain sexual acts or body parts. He compensates for being gay by ostensibly producing a hegemonic

masculine form – he strives to be the best at everything. Eventually he becomes a modern Renaissance man earning two Ivy League degrees, and working as a high profile financial executive, journalist and published author. While neither Jamie nor Brad expressly share a story of shame and discomfort regarding their sexuality, they do describe feeling compelled to be good at everything to counteract the deficits they associate with being black and gay. Whereas Tobias locates the impulse to overachieve in his sexuality, Jaime is clear that his efforts are first a function of his race, and then of his sexuality. This suggests that unlike Tobias, his efforts are the result of slightly different structural factors.

The workplace is not the only setting in which participants claimed to enact SBM discourses and performances. “John,” a Black gay male in his late twenties, describes how family provides another site for such performances.

I think that’s an issue for a lot of Black gay men. That’s how we . . . can be normalized in our families. That we . . . compensate either educationally, send more money home, [be] successful, become reputable . . . [at] something that can get somebody to be proud of [us] because . . . [our] sexual orientation, they’re not proud of that . . . And so if I can do the schooling, if I can send money home, do everything, continue to rescue everyone then I’ll be a legitimate member of my family particularly because I come from a Black family . . . I don’t come from a gay family.

John perceives his respectability, legitimacy and normalcy to be diminished by his sexuality, and believes that his family’s pride in him can only be restored by “reputable” acts. While John does not specifically mention manhood or masculinity, the compensatory efforts he describes – educational, financial and professional achievement – and his desire to perform these for his family in order to rescue them, is consistent with expectations enshrined in the politics of respectability. John remarks are quite

specific in this regard in that he mentions his origins within a “black family,” which is indicative of the racial dynamics that structure his narrative of being a SBM. But in addition to race, his story of performing as SBM brings together race, class, gender and sexuality to produce a gendered construction aimed at elevating his status within a particular Black community.

Strategic deployments of the SBM were not unique to adulthood. Participants recounted childhood efforts to produce hegemonic masculine forms to mask self presentation, and hide a burgeoning gay identity in activities that produced masculine status and prestige. Forty four year old “Michael” describes how youthful dedication to education allowed him to hide his sexuality in a commitment to racial progress:

There weren’t positive gay men that I knew. I didn’t know any. And if I did know, it was like “He’s a gay man in the choir,” or “a faggot” it wasn’t something that was respected. So yeah, I kept it hidden and I focused as I said on my education because to me education is how you can escape and for me it was how I coped. When people met me, especially older adults, their first question invariably always was, “How are you doing in school?” So that was my way of saying to them, “Look I’m a good person, I do good in school.”

Michael’s invocation of the faggot signifies childhood awareness of the construction of black gay men as weak and passive. Cognizant of his own sexuality, he intentionally distances himself from this negative construction by resorting to a SBM performance. Michael earns prestige from his dedication to education not just because it is respectable, but because it signals his commitment to racial uplift and as a result, his sexuality becomes irrelevant. Michael’s desire for the approval of “older adults” was more than the psychological coping mechanism he describes, but served to promote his status and value within Black communities.

Thirty-eight year old “Xavier’s” story also illustrates how the effort to become a SBM begins in childhood. While Xavier’s performances are initially unintentional, his experience of its benefits leads him to make conscious efforts to continue the project into adulthood. The first of his two narratives reflects on his childhood.

Growing up and being a more effeminate boy . . . [I was] teased by other boys until I became a track star in junior high school. In high school . . . all of a sudden I was involved in student government. Then I was just this, this star, you know. I was this person that everyone wanted to be around.

As Xavier relates his transformation from teased child to a “track star,” he implies that this change in status was not a planned effort, but an outgrowth of his successes on the track team. He then builds on this prestige through new involvements until he was no longer a pariah at school but someone that “everyone wanted to be around.” Xavier’s successful performance of traditional masculinity (athletic prowess, leadership ability) contributes to his elevated status on campus, a point he makes clear with his multiple references to becoming “a star.” Later, in discussing his career as a senior level executive, he states:

Always know your stuff . . . Always dot your i’s and cross your t’s. ‘Cause sometimes, you know, I know that people wanna say shit to me . . . [But here] they really can’t fuck with me. Cause my stuff is tight. So if you’re gonna come at me with some bullshit, you better make sure you’re coming at me correctly. ‘Cause I will slice you up and spit you back out again! And you will think, “I just got cussed out. I think that faggot just cussed me out.” And I do it with [my boss], with my peers. Don’t come at me with no half-assed bullshit. Don’t do it.

At work, Xavier over performs. He “always knows his stuff, and “cannot be fucked with” because his “stuff is tight.” His tone is aggressive, almost combative as he states that anyone who “comes at him” incorrectly can expect to be “sliced up and spit back out” or “cussed out.” With this antagonistic affect, he intends to disrupt other’s view of

him: “I think that faggot just cussed me out.” The nature of this disruption is clear. As a “faggot,” Xavier is supposed to be docile and passive, but he is instead aggressive. His behavior is meant to intimidate and discourage those who might “come at him with any half assed bullshit.” This performance works to undo any inference that his sexuality or effeminate presentation signals weakness. His effort to appear tough and fearsome bears a strong resemblance to the thug trope and its unique construction of ideal black masculinity. The thug, according to scholars, stakes its claim to authentic black manhood not only through its hypermasculine and heteronormative qualities, but via its embodiment of an outsider status rooted in the racial and class structures of society (Jeffries 2009). Thug “existence . . . is based on the precondition and understanding that you are hated” by society; leading it to glamorize rebellion through somewhat nihilistic, masculine performances – aggression, fear, violence – that lend themselves to a critique of race and class inequality; and a reassertion of masculine empowerment (Jeffries 2009:36). Viewed through the thug narrative, Xavier’s aggressive retort to his supervisor(s) may be read as a racially-coded story of rebellion meant to challenge not only his imposed social status, but also the impact that status has upon his manhood.

Of all the accounts of SBM performances, 29 year old “Tom” most directly and poignantly describes its significance in elevating the social position of Black gay men.

Men traditionally perceive themselves as powerful . . . For a man to acknowledge his lack of power is . . . it’s a form of emasculation . . . I never perceived myself to be anything less than male . . . [and] . . . no self-respecting man wants to accept anything that attaches . . . itself as taking power away from him. And being gay . . . was being considered weak . . . So, I think the big take away . . . was that black men lack power in society . . . I came to understand what power was and recognized that power is associated with wealth but more importantly with influence; your ability to sorta make things happen and not for things to

happen to you. That's a very sad revelation . . . When I thought about what career to choose . . . I framed that in terms of power. I recognize that in many ways I lack power or I have certain social identifiers that may keep me outside of power structures being both black and gay. But there is still this overwhelming need to change things in society and I want to have a certain amount of power to do it and I knew that a law degree would help me do that both in terms of the prestige of the school I attended but also in terms of building wealth. Because at this stage money is one the last forms of power I had the potential of earning.

Tom reveals much of why the SBM narrative holds such a strong appeal for Black gay men. Conscious of the institutional power inherent in masculinity and his alienation from that power as both a black man and a gay man, the hegemonic construction offers him the potential to elevate his social status, and access to structural power. Notably, Tom's interest in accessing power is less about self-promotion or greed, but more about social justice, as he seeks the power to "sorta make things happen and not for things to happen to you." In other words, he is attracted to power that will help him to gain control over his own life, and effect structural change on behalf of black men. In identifying status, career and wealth as venues for accessing power, Tom sees hope and potential for his successful accomplishment of the SBM in terms of "earnable," Marketplace resources.

These narratives about being and becoming SBM are a clear illustration of the operation of interlocking systems of race, sexuality, gender and class in these men's lives. In providing narrators with an agentic response to racist and homophobic structures that organize their lives, the SBM enables the construction of a coherent self that not only challenges those existing narratives, but does so without compromising their racial, sexual or gender identities. While fundamentally a class and gender formation, the SBM would appear to accomplish more than the (re)production of those formations. Its narrative is a direct product of the racial organization of society by

relying upon contemporary notions of ideal black manhood. Thus, the SBM narrative would appear to also enable a racial project that allows these narrators to reconstitute themselves as racially-conscious, and “respectable,” black, gay men committed to racial progress.

CONCLUSION

As described in previous chapters, existing accounts of black gay life operate as stock stories that allow interlocking systems of race, sexuality, gender and class to produce the social marginality of black gay men in seemingly neutral ways. What stands out is the multidimensionality of race as a defining feature of their social experience. For these authors, racist and homophobic narratives (and their corresponding archetypes) and their interactive framing of race and sexuality shape the identity work of individual storytellers and the lived experiences of all black gay men. As a result, the complex, and considered negotiations that characterize these stories of gender are a clear narrative of resistance in the truest sense. These accounts delineate the dynamics of social power in the lives of the narrators, and make clear some of the complex ways that heteronormativity influences the production of racial hierarchy -- both as a product of white supremacy and as a function of black antiracist discourses. Thus narrating oneself as a SBM serves as a discursive strategy that draws upon existing narratives of authentic black manhood to construct a strategically organized counternarrative of black gay manhood in which the narrator emphasizes the racial, gendered and sexual aspects of his

experience as simultaneous and interactively produced.

These narrators' reliance on middle class masculinity to produce subversive accounts of black gay manhood reveals an interesting paradox to their identity work. While counternarratives are traditionally about challenging existing social relations, and revealing the normative operation of structural power, these accounts (like the black counternarratives before them) draw on unmistakable resources of prestige and privilege. Moreover, the narrators are unequivocal about their desire to attain the social and cultural resources allocated to the dominant forms of masculinity they seek to emulate; seeing them as necessary for transforming their place within the social hierarchy. Some, as Kimmel (2005) theorized, repudiate effeminacy among black gay men as a stigmatizing breach of the gender order that impacts all black gay men. Thus in many obvious ways, these men can be seen to be complicit in the reproduction of existing class and gender inequalities, and may as black feminists have long argued, be equally accountable for conflating black liberation with patriarchy. But Cohen (2007) cautions against such monolithic analyses of how "race, class and gender define people's differing relations to dominant and normalizing power" (545). Seeing such work as reductive, she instead advocates for intersectional analyses that afford greater insight into important distinctions in access to and use of power and privilege; and more nuanced accounts of the structure of domination; motives and strategies of resistance; and the lived experience of race.

The narrative approach used here is useful for mining this complexity precisely because it allows us to extend our analytical gaze beyond the interpretive dynamics and

personal motives of the social actors involved to the social relations that shape their interpretive choices. Moreover, it acknowledges that those interpretive choices may be multiply-influenced, and textured. In other words, narrative approaches appreciate that “stories . . . allow us to uncover a more layered reality than is immediately apparent” (Bell 1999:317). Thus while the personal accounts presented here illuminate individual interpretations of gender scripts and norms, what I have tried to demonstrate is that these stories are also organized (perhaps fundamentally) by racial hierarchy. As a foundational aspect of U.S. society, race shapes every American institution and cultural practice (Carmichael and Hamilton 1992; Feagin 2006; Feagin 2000). Thus even when race intersects with other forms of oppression, it remains a powerful organizing structure that cannot be reduced to other forms of inequality. Therefore, because these narrators are located within a system of white supremacy, they do not exist apart from, nor are they at liberty to narrate themselves decontextualized from that structure. Embedded within it, the men constructed an account that acknowledged the presence of race in their lives, the existence of homophobia (both broadly and within black communities) and how they experience them interactively. We see evidence of this within SBM stories which provided a direct response to the homophobia they suffer using accounts of manhood from black antiracist rhetorics as its primary narrative resource. In this way, the storytellers frame their black gay manhood as a part of the overall black experience in America. It would seem that in specifically narrating themselves as racially conscious black men (and not just as men) they remind us that being gay or same gender loving does not detract from their also being seen as “authentically” black, included as

members of black communities and involved in racial politics.

It is not uncommon for intersectional work to enable this more complex view of social phenomenon and assert the analytical value of viewing structures of domination as linked, interactive, mutually constitutive and historically contingent. Intersectional scholars have consistently advocated that such work can reveal more nuanced accounts of how the social world is both organized and experienced (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Davis 2008; King 1988). Thus the narratives of masculinity presented here offer insight into more than just systems of gender, but the structural interplay of race, gender, sexuality and class. The story of being/becoming a SBM allows us to see that the production of racial hierarchy and experience may at times rely upon other systems of inequality to become truly pervasive -- particularly at the level of cultural practices -- and that while sexualities are without a doubt multiple and unfixed, when they interact with other structural categories they may become expressed in ways that do not always emphasize the sexual. Thus, deepening our sociological understanding of race (and other forms of inequality) will likely require that we broaden our scholarly narrative so that it better reflects the complexity of social life as it is actually lived. Social actors do not always experience racial inequality and oppression within discrete categories; or live in a social world where there are always pure victims and oppressors. While we should not let go of our foundational and systemic understandings of race (as this structure shapes how race is deployed and experienced) it may be valuable to begin thinking in terms of race as multidimensional – where the structure is not always linearly organized, and thus may be differently experienced by a wide variety of social actors living at these multiple

and complex intersections of the social hierarchy. This may allow us to better uncover a variety of phenomenon that on their face may appear to have nothing (or little) to do with race, but are nonetheless part of the fascinating possibilities produced by that structure.

CHAPTER VI

“DIVINELY CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD”: A SUBVERSIVE STORY
ABOUT RACE, SEXUALITY AND THE BLACK CHURCH

Throughout American history black churches have been one of the most defining social institutions within the black community. Black churches have since the days of slavery offered refuge from white racism; served as community gathering places; functioned as sites of antiracist activism; promoted racial pride; advocated for black social welfare; and devoted itself to racial uplift (Barnes 2005; Bounds-Littlefield 2005; Ellison 1991a, 1991b; Feagin 2000; Jewell 2007; Morris 1984, Patillo-McCoy 1998). Consequently, scholars have determined that the black church has contributed a distinctive cultural toolkit – or an ideological and performative repertoire⁶³ -- that has been used to guide collective social action, accent the prominence of race in the lives of black people, and challenge the hegemony of white supremacy (Barnes 2005; Bounds-Littlefield 2005; Jewell 2007; Patillo-McCoy 1998).⁶⁴

⁶³According to Barnes (2005) depending on which aspects of cultural theory one subscribes to, these repertoires can include “symbolic vehicles of meaning, . . . beliefs, ritual practices, art forms and ceremonies, . . . language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life; . . . or [may include] ideas [that] shape group worldviews and behavior; . . . [or construct a] collective consciousness which helps establish a group dynamic” (p. 968). With regards to the black church she and others (see Bounds-Littlefield 2005; Patillo-McCoy 1998 and Jewell 2007) argue that such symbols as “rituals, songs, sayings, sacred meetings and biblical stories” are used to interpret events, inspire community based action, and provide organizational vision (p. 969). Patillo-McCoy (1998) more broadly emphasizes rhetorical, interactional, and material tools used in black churches as both establishing the grounds for social action, as well as constitute such action. For her, a critical aspect of this cultural work is to both ideologically construct black collectivity as well as produce the necessary social networks to facilitate collective action.

⁶⁴While for the sake of focus choose not to accent this here, it is worth noting that the cultural functions of the black church are broadly examined in scholarly work as a subset of social movements theory -- specifically those aspects of the literature which deals with cultural practices of movements and

Given the significance of the black church for producing black community and collective identity, it is perhaps not surprising that of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S., blacks are the most likely to report having a formal religious affiliation. Most blacks (85%) claim that religion is very important to them, and at least 60% say they attend church at least once a week (Pitt 2010a, 2010b). Even among blacks who claim to have no religious affiliation, 70% say that religion is either somewhat or very important in their lives (Patillo-McCoy 1998; Pew 2008).

Yet while black churches have generally been essential for the creation of a collective black “we,” they have simultaneously been hostile spaces for black gays and lesbians (Douglas 2003; Griffin 2004a; Pitt 2010a, 2010b; Schulte & Battle 2004). Considerable scholarly and anecdotal effort has been devoted to describing the regularity with which black homosexuality is criticized, same-sex sexual activity is characterized as sinful, and black gay men in particular have been denounced in the doctrines and pulpits of America’s black churches (Anderson 2004; Douglas 2003; Griffin 2004a; Pitt 2010a, 2010b). Moreover since the 1990s, black churches have frequently become the “strange bedfellows” of white conservatives in activist efforts challenging pro-gay policy initiatives at the local, state and national levels (Khan 1998; Pharr 1996). This is not to suggest that antigay attitudes are unique to black churches,⁶⁵ but that such attitudes have been observed to have uniquely racialized implications in communities of

ideological framing and its role in creating collective action, identity, message framing, and accessing resources. For these specific kinds of conversations, Barnes 2005 and Patillo-McCoy 1998 are particularly useful.

⁶⁵According to Schulte and Battle’s (2004) review of the literature, these attitudes have been shown to correlate with “religiosity” which includes such factors as church attendance, and the internalization of religious values.

faith, where white gays and lesbians tend to have greater access to gay-affirming denominations; and para-church organizations⁶⁶ that offer pro-gay, Christian messages and welcoming environments for gay and lesbian congregants (Pitt 2010a; McQueeney 2009).⁶⁷ Moreover, the homophobic rhetoric emanating from black churches, while undoubtedly a product of organized antiracist efforts, has nonetheless been noted to exhibit an acute sense of rage, sexual shame and disdain for the plight of black gays and lesbians in ways that contrast sharply with the church's generally progressive social agenda regarding matters of racial solidarity and structural inequality (Bounds-Littlefield 2005; Douglas 2004; Griffin 2004a, Patillo-McCoy 1998). Despite these conditions, black gay men (and lesbians) continue to see the black church as an important social and spiritual resource. Scholars report that black gay men not only continue to hold membership within these relatively orthodox religious environments; but participate at levels comparable to heterosexual women (Pitt 2010b). Moreover, black gay men involve themselves in a range of church activities such as preaching, performing arts, and leadership; or through the church, use their talents in service to the black community (Pitt 2010b:56). Unfortunately, in return, they often experience alienation from; and ongoing oppression within communities that are usually expected to serve as a primary defense against the daily experience of white racism (Feagin & McKinney 2003; Green

⁶⁶For example Dignity is an organization that supports and advocates for gay and lesbian Catholics and Integrity does identical work for gay and lesbian Episcopalians. Meanwhile, gay-affirming denominations such as the Metropolitan Community Church, or the Evangelical Lutheran Church or the United Church of Christ welcome congregants of all sexual orientations and have gay-positive doctrines.

⁶⁷Pitt 2010a and McQueeney 2009 commented that while there are a few local gay-positive churches that minister from a black cultural frame, there are no national para-church organizations or denominations which are open and affirming.

2007a).

While not all of the men I interviewed claimed to be religious (much less Christian), the overwhelming majority (71%) did express some commitment to faith (with Christianity being the most commonly expressed tradition); and the frequent and active expression of that faith was important to 71% of those interviewed. Reflecting on their varied church experiences, the men did recount personal stories of disappointment and frustration with the use of Christian morality to estrange them from their church and racial communities. But the stories they told were not simply tales of anger and resignation. Nor did their accounts necessarily mirror those reported by other scholars, who claim that gays and lesbians simply reframe Christian discourses of homosexual deviancy (see McQueeny 2009 and Pitt 2010a, 2010b). Instead, their tales of navigating heteronormativity in black churches illuminate a broader contest over the terms and cultural markers of racial and Christian belonging. Their narrative claims to racial and Christian “authenticity” utilize discourses of black consciousness, relatively orthodox interpretations of Christianity, and commentary on the influence of white supremacy on black church doctrine. Their life stories represent an interesting paradox in that they both rely upon as well as critique the elite assimilationist ideologies at the heart of much black antiracist church work; while offering to re-theorize the relationship between Christian faith and black (homo)sexuality in ways that remediate black gay men’s individual and collective self-presentation.

In this chapter, I discuss participants’ narrative challenges to the cultural repertoires of black collectivity practiced by the black church. I borrow aspects of

Barnes' (2005) and Patillo-McCoy's (1998), definitions of church culture in that I specifically examine the participants' negotiations of cultural stories and scriptural interpretations of race, sexuality and faith. I first discuss participants' accounts of the tensions that exist between their hopes and desires for rootedness within black church communities against their experiences of alienation. Here, their life stories center on appeals to "authenticity" whereby they seek personal agency, control, and consistency in managing their self-presentations. These efforts at becoming their "true selves" across multiple contexts are characterized as critical to the process of forging meaningful relationships on which to transform their outsider status within their church communities. Next, I examine participants' narrative efforts to re-theorize the relationship between Christian faith and sexuality. These rich and complex discussions not only acknowledge the socially constructed nature of church practices and doctrine, but see them as fundamentally organized by white racism. In response, participants' counternarratives not only problematize the heteronormative assumptions embedded within black church doctrine and scriptural interpretations of sexuality, but assert a more central role for (homo)sexuality within Christian faith. I close with some reflections on how these life stories function as a subversive story about black collective identity and of black sexuality.

HOPING FOR AUTHENTICITY IN THE FACE OF ALIENATION

For post modernist scholars of sexuality and gender, the notion of "authentic"

persons is considered taboo. “Authenticity” not only implies an objective reality in which stable and essential identities of race, sexuality and gender are possible; but reifies binary categories that routinely constrain individual expression, and facilitate social oppression. By contrast, social identity as innately unstable, interpretive and interactive; conceptualizes the social actor (and social identity) in purely postmodern terms. Here, the potential for individual expression is said to be unfettered, and the potential for social equality is accentuated. Yet despite such claims, these participants describe a yearning for connection to black community and wholeness (or the public integration of racial and sexual identity) that is difficult to characterize as anything but a desire for authenticity. Their claims resemble Calhoun-Davis’ (2008) argument that the assertion of authenticity is not only a reflection of the realities of social life; but often a collective or individual social project aimed at creating visibility, asserting personal agency, and presenting a coherent self. Moreover, the psychological literature portrays a process of becoming authentic that is easily translatable into sociological terms. Psychologists see the social self as a product of strong ties developed within social networks; agentic choices at self-presentation; and the product of identity work rooted in social interactions and meaningful integration within those networks (Comer 2007; Corey 1991). Under these circumstances, “authenticity” closely resembles the process of impression management in which the social actor endeavors to influence others or gain social rewards by constructing and presenting a self image that is not only consistent; but is positively evaluated by others (Schlenker, 1980). Thus for the participants I interviewed, nestled within their discussions of alienation from black churches were expressions of hope to

be rewarded with others' acceptance for having fully integrated their race and sexuality. For example, "Lamarr" a 33 year old banker living in the southeast, while reflecting on the extent to which he has yet to disclose his sexual identity to others, describes the desire to construct and present a social self that is consistent across varied social settings

I wanted to be the person who was out, who didn't care -- who didn't care about, you know, what other people thought about me being out -- who was -- who didn't change when I went from one place to another; when I went to work. I didn't want to be a one person when I went to work and another person when I went to church and another person when I went here. I wanted to be the exact same person in all those places and just be strong in my identity.

Nestled within Lamarr's aspirations for a coherent identity, is a desire to be completely "out" -- or live with a publicly disclosed sexual identity -- and to live this identity with greater ease. By "ease" he references the opportunity to have his self-presentation be consistent across multiple settings (with church being one of them). Implicit in this wish is an acknowledgement that his sexual identity has been or is expected to be rejected by others. While Lamarr hopes to someday "not care what other people think of him" he ultimately reveals a strong desire to be connected to -- or an integral part of -- his various networks. Thus being fully "out" is only meaningful to Lamarr within the context of community. Lamarr goes on to describe his alienation from religious community as being a direct consequence of his choice to fellowship in black churches.

I grew up Episcopalian and I didn't have any issues with religion whatsoever. None. I knew God loved me. I loved God. I was very happy with who I was religiously and then I went to college and then I started going to Black churches. And when I start going to Black church, it was the first time I ever thought that I was anything. I thought that God didn't like me, I thought, you know, I went to the churches where they would tell all the gay people to come to the front of the church to get the demon exorcised out of them. You know, I had people laying hands on me the whole thing and I was like -- for a long time. I was very turned off by religion.

Whereas Lamarr's experiences within the Episcopalian church produced no conflict in his religious or sexual identities, his experiences within the black church are quite different. There, Lamarr describes suddenly being made to feel inauthentic and alienated. His alienation appears to be the direct consequence of cultural tales, and church practices that readily identify him as a sinner, and sinners as separate from God. This characterization has had the added impact of separating him from the community (both literally and figuratively); as within Christianity separation from God (especially by virtue of sin) places one outside of the Christian community (Dever 2007). Thus as a cultural practice, separation from the church body – or outsider status – stands as the physical manifestation of one's debased spiritual condition. Moreover the cultural rhetoric used to express this outsider status, or to mark gay men as social outsiders, affirms Griffin's (2004a) observation regarding the acute rage, sexual shame and disdain for black gays that it tends to express. In this specific instance, Lamarr explains that the congregation viewed homosexuality as not just sinful, but as so reprehensible that it required the most radical collective intervention possible; more so than other socially proscribed behaviors. In this regard, homosexuality is marked as the most egregious sin and thereby worthy of the strictest separation from God and community. Notably, such claims are said to be rooted in "authentic" interpretations of scripture which scholars have suggested is difficult, if not impossible to prove (see Douglas 2004; Griffin 2004a).⁶⁸

While it is clear that certain church activities -- such as scriptural interpretations,

⁶⁸The frequent use of dogma in this way is a cultural practice that I will discuss in greater detail below.

marking as sinner, and separation from the body -- create the experience of alienation and inauthenticity for black gay men, these do not appear to be the only cultural practices that do so. Many participants found the churches' general anxiety regarding black sexuality to be a primary source of homophobic attitudes and practices. This analysis affirms empirical work which has deconstructed the church's views on sexuality and has found them to be based on a generally white framing of Christianity which posits the body and human sexuality in opposition to the sacred (see Butler 2004; Douglas 2004 or Griffin 2004b). Exemplifying this perspective, "Randall" a 22 year old undergraduate studying in the northeast observed:

I think, we should be pointing the finger at the black church for maintaining silences around homosexuality and sexuality in general.

While Randall found the anxiety over black (homo)sexuality to be expressed as a general silence on all matters of sexuality, "Brad" a public health researcher in his early 40s commented that all fundamentalist, or more doctrinally orthodox Christian churches are uncomfortable with the issue of human sexuality:

For me, it was primarily about a very classically fundamentalist mindset about sexual orientation, and about it being wrong, and evil, hell and all that stuff. In a nutshell, it was very much affirmed by Christianity, a certain type of Christianity.

Similarly, "Gregory," a retired federal employee in his late fifties, echoed the claim that the black church's general discomfort with sexuality is accentuated in the face of same-sex sexual behavior:

The Baptist church especially frowns on display of sexuality period, and if you are gay, my God, that's way of the box.

Comments such as these confirm the pervasive nature of this sex-negative (with

homosexuality being really negative) ideology among black churches. According to Barnes (2005) and Patillo-McCoy (1998) these kinds of ideologies, scriptural interpretations and social narratives of morality comprise the cultural repertoires of the black church and define the terms of collective black identity. Thus the effort to morally stigmatize black homosexuality serves to discursively (and then literally) separate it not only from the church community, but from black identity; creating the conditions under which black gay men are made to feel alienated from and inauthentic among black people. Moreover, while perhaps unaware of the white framing that pervades these sexual mores, some participants do perceive a certain irony that the terms of black sexual identity are in fact predicated on white interests. For example, Lamarr reserves harsh criticism for the black church for the lengths it will go to protect heteronormativity as an important racial interest:

Early on, I would say it was hard for me to be gay because I was black, and even now, the two are -- especially here in the South -- they don't always go well together because a lot of times black gets mixed with religion; and religion is mixed with intolerance to gay people, which is totally ignorant. I mean I will never forget when Bush ran for his second term and I mean the black churches started backing Bush based on gay marriage. And that was the most absurd thing in the world to me, I'm like, "Do you have any idea that this man has no care for you whatsoever?" . . . But the Black churches were willing to just jump right on the bandwagon based on gay marriage, which is completely absurd to me. But that spoke volumes to me about where we [gays] are with the people.

In addition to noting the alienating nature of black church practices for black gay men, Lamarr perceives an inherent conflict in the church's commitment to heterosexual norms and the black community's long term interests. These concerns are echoed by "Bernard," a 40 year old business manager living in the southeast:

If you're black and gay, you can only be black and gay in two ways, for the most part. You can either be an undertaker or you can be a choir director. And . . . the black community is fine with that. Everybody knows that Preacher So-and-so, Deacon So-and-so . . . *Where do you think that comes from?* . . . It's like a dog. As long as that dog is on that chain; the undertaker or the choir director; that's fine. They'll let him run around the circumference but once you break that chain, it's bad, it's bad . . . [M]y family's like that . . . church fearing, southern Baptist; love God. But I don't think know God, but have a veneer of God. This formica-laminate of Christianity. You know? What I call dash board Christians; where the Bible just sit on the dash board of the car and just slide across and they take it out for church service and hold it, and then when church is over they throw it back on the dashboard and it'll clean the dashboard for the rest of the week until they take it off again . . . Nothing about the guts, so to speak, of God. Going to church and wallowing and shouting. We want the pain, but we don't want the body. And that's why the black community is gonna be at its own demise. HIV is gonna be its demise. The number 2 killer of black men, . . . the # 3 killer of black women, . . . [and] we won't address it.

Like Lamarr, Bernard perceives that dire consequences result from the church's commitment to heteronormativity. While his accusations may appear dramatic, scholars have empirically traced the failure of black communities to provide a comprehensive and collective response to HIV/AIDs to the cultural influence of the black church and its privileging of heterosexual norms (see Cohen 1999).⁶⁹ But Bernard's goes beyond a critique of the church's commitment to heterosexuality. He also suggests that this cultural practice operates as a mechanism of social control which limits the expression of non heterosexual identities and the capacity for all congregants to work towards the enhanced social welfare of the black community. Rubin (1992) confirms that social

⁶⁹It is worth noting that Cohen's (1999) claims here are not that the black church, or black communities more broadly should have borne the sole responsibility of responding to the HIV/AIDs crisis. She is in fact clear that the lack of a comprehensive social response was a government, health and pharmaceutical industry failure. She does point out that in light of this failure gay communities quickly began to organize and provide their own indigenous services; and despite the devastating impact of the disease on black communities, and the appeals of many, there was no parallel response within the black community. There was in fact, almost a refusal to address the issue which she demonstrates was the result of religious and cultural attitudes about black homosexuality.

control functions are innate to heteronormativity. As a fundamentally socio-political construct, she suggests that heteronormativity rewards some forms of sexual expression while punishing and suppressing others. This results in a sexual caste system in which heterosexual identities are afforded more social power than other sexual identities.

Moreover, Bernard condemns the church's impulse to conform to heterosexual norms as a superficial approach to faith. It is possible to trace the social factors that produce not only these types of scriptural interpretations, but also the uncritical response of which Bernard speaks. Brewer's (2003) insistence on context (history, culture, social forces) for understanding scriptural interpretations makes it difficult to separate the historical and contemporary manifestations of white oppression (and their unique impact on black churches) from the black church's scriptural point of view. First as I discussed in Chapter III, the church has since the immediate post-bellum period, played an important leadership role in respectability discourses and practices which are clearly reflected in its conservative attitudes regarding black sexuality; and this is correspondingly reflected in church doctrine, scriptural interpretations and practices regarding homosexuality.

Second, while I will discuss this in greater detail below, it should be noted that Douglas (2004) explains that black churches have (for a number of reasons) tended to privilege and value an oral tradition of biblical knowledge, and distrust biblical scholarship as a tool of white oppression. Consequently, what Bernard experiences as a "lazy"

Christianity among black churches, can be understood as a cultural commitment to a theological canon that has guided and supported blacks through the most oppressive circumstances. It is perhaps the social bonds facilitated by this commitment that led most

participants, despite a variety of alienating and ostracizing church experiences, to express continued hope for communion and authenticity within black churches. For example, twenty-nine year old Tom, who is currently pursuing a professional degree, describes his experience of attempting to integrate his sexuality and faith.

I pray often. My prayers have changed over the years. I think in the beginning, it was, “God, help me not to be this.” And now, it’s, “God, help me to be faithful as a gay male,” whatever faithfulness looks like.

Tom’s prayers reveal fundamental transformations in self-presentation. Whereas at one point the kinds of cultural practices described above led him to believe that his sexuality and his faith were incompatible with one another, he no longer appears to experience this tension. This revelation appears to have inspired him to remain connected to his faith.

When asked to describe how or why he feels this transformation occurred, he goes on to say:

[M]y hope is to be happy, to live a good life, to reengage the church and to find a church where I can feel like I can fully be who I am, be accepted for that. And utilize all of my gifts and skills -- because a big part of my identity I recognized given all the time that I spent in church -- I need to exercise my pastoral gift and I need to be impacted by those who are part of the church community. I mean by that analogy that you cease to be a Christian when you separate yourself from the body. Part of being a Christian is being attached to that community and all the frustration and joys will come along with it. That’s a cross in and of itself. And if you reject that cross, I think you have not fully lived into—I will say your spirituality, but all that comes with being a Christian . . . I have reconciled my faith and my sexuality but I haven’t reconciled being a part of the Christian community and being gay man.

The peace Tom has made with his faith and sexual orientation produced feelings of hope for a happy, good life within a church community where his sexuality is both respected and valued. Despite currently feeling alienated, Tom perceives his connection to this

kind of community to be the ultimate expression of his faith.⁷⁰ The nature and importance of this relationship is evident in the metaphors he uses to express it. While references to the church as a “community” and a “body” are not uncommon in Christian circles, they do indicate how Tom experiences his relationship to the church. The words imply an unbreakable, intimate bond among members; and the sharing of values, beliefs, and purpose. Moreover, his reference to this bond as a “cross” that requires one to accept the frustration and joys that come with such relationships implies fundamental social connections and obligations such as the family; and is even evocative of traditional marriage vows (“better or worse, richer or poorer”); which further reveal the nature and significance of this affiliation. These interpretations of the church (body, community, and family) are consistent with the solidarity-building and identity-making functions the church has always played for many blacks (see Barnes 2005, and Patillo-MCoy 1998); and illustrate participants’ continued reliance on the church for a sense of both religious and racial identity.

“Jaime”, a diversity consultant and church pastor is in his mid-40s also describes his struggle to reconcile his Christianity with his sexuality as a process of becoming “whole.” After months of therapy, he claims to have one day reached an epiphany:

I believe the Creator spoke into my spirit, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” . . . I realized that I had never really felt like God had ever said anything to me about not being Christian and gay. It was all the stuff that I gotten from man. And so that started my journey to really begin to reconcile being this black Christian gay person. So I began a deep sense of prayer and fastening and searching to understand what the Bible said and what God’s will was and so on . . . I was in prayer . . . and I discovered a whole bunch of materials . . . that gave me another way to look at and understand some of the

⁷⁰ A claim which has also been made by church scholars (see Dever 2007).

same Scriptures that had been used to speak against homosexuality. And so I came away with a different understanding. Feeling a lot more connected and whole.

Jamie describes his epiphany as divinely inspired and this description immediately invokes scriptural narratives of men whose religious devotion manifested as on-going conversations directly with God. Moreover, Jamie's narrative self-characterization as "prophet" is demonstrated by references to the earnestness of his devotion (fasting, prayer, searching the Scriptures) that is also biblically symbolic of devout men. Building on these references, Jamie suggests that it is this devotion to God that ultimately brings him resolution with his faith and sexuality. Narrating himself in this way, transforms Jamie's presentation from that of "sinful homosexual," to "authentic Christian," who is more devout than his peers. These references accomplish more than the simple rehabilitation of Jamie's self-image, or the re-framing of Christian doctrine. The reference directly contests the cultural markers of Christian identity by conflating his black, "gay" person with his "Christian" person; thereby challenging the cultural and narrative practices that typically separate the two as incompatible.⁷¹ Instead, the sinner is made to seem as more devout than average as a result of having struggled so hard to claim his faith. And like the devout Christian who is said to be rewarded for his faith, Jaime describes the result of his efforts to resolve the conflict between his faith and sexuality to be participation in a more welcoming church community.

I had put myself in spiritual places where I wasn't gonna be beat up . . . I found myself in that place for close to 16 years. Very comfortable growing spiritually

⁷¹I wish to briefly highlight that Jamie's new insights on the meaning faith and sexuality are accomplished via a thorough review of scriptural and non-scriptural sources, a practice I will discuss in detail in the next section.

and having a wonderful life, but I was sheltered. I do admit that there were places and times that I would hear of, you know, some hateful homophobic stuff happening in religious communities, but it wasn't happening where I was going to fellowship . . .

When asked to describe what he had learned through the process of becoming

“authentic,” Jamie stated:

Sitting in a place of critical-ness of others versus . . . sharing with others my perspective, and if they differ . . . still [being] able to respectfully give the feedback that I would want to give. And [to] receive feedback from people and have that not define who I am, but have it be how they've experienced me . . . and having myself really just be a fabulous person . . . divinely created in the image of God; and that I show up in love and light and invite and try to create that space for other people to do the same. But it really has been about a journey of forgiving myself, forgiving others [and] not holding on to grudges.

Jamie's description of having achieved authenticity confirms the criteria that others have thus far noted as definitive of this process: a resolution of sexuality/faith conflicts; positive relations with not only other Christians (or even non-Christians); and a strong connection to faith. While these elements appear critical to the process of black gay men becoming “authentic” within black church communities, they may also be characterized as challenging very few of the church's existing cultural repertoires. The most distinctive aspect of this narrative is the participant's refusal to be defined by anti-gay rhetorics. These accounts do not eschew Christian doctrine or connections, but actively embrace the church community, Christianity. In fact participants frequently position themselves as more worthy of their Christian faith. What is clear is that the overall process of becoming authentic is about finding a way to become integrated within the existing social framework as becoming authentic comprises more than internal work to resolve faith and sexuality tensions, but interactive efforts designed to gain acceptance and

integration within black church communities. In becoming an accepted member of a church community, participants appear to have found a reflection of themselves that matches the person they believe themselves to be, not the non-black heretics which those narratives present them as. But efforts to alter other's perceptions of them (as well as their perceptions of themselves) also led them to wrestle with church authority, and specific scriptural interpretations of black (homo)sexuality. In the next section I turn my attention to these engagements with scripture in greater detail.

THE SOCIAL (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF A BLACK, GAY CHRISTIAN

Sociologists have since Durkheim's writings about religion, understood the innately constructionist nature of religious faith and practice. While the idea of the "spiritual" being a social product as opposed to a divine invention may be a novel idea for most, it was surprising that many of the participants seemed able to intrinsically acknowledge the socially constructed dimensions of the black church and as a result, engaged in a complex narrative process to reveal the implications of this for church doctrine -- particularly in the area of sexuality. For example, "Clinton" a 44 year old unemployed counselor from the southeast explained:

I'll be honest with you I never heard the sermons going up. Adam and Steve? I never heard those. I came up in the CME church and switched. Been a member of like seven denominations since. But I never heard those sermons but there was always something about me knew that I think it was just—it was an institution like school . . .

In describing the impact that church doctrine has had on his self-image, Clinton seems

less impacted by homophobic rhetoric emanating from black churches than most other participants have described. He's not been an active member of a church community for a long period of time, and claims never to have heard a homophobic sermon. What is interesting is that he attempts to explain his social distance from the church (and church ideology) through characterizing his relationship to church as being "an institution like school." For Clinton understanding the church as an agent of social ordering seems to bolster a critical view of the church's stance on homosexuality. These innately sociological perspectives on the black church appeared in other ways and collectively aided participants in questioning or challenging church practices. Lamarr, for example, came to question the credibility of church leadership:

[I]f you're supposed to form your relationship with God, then why am I going to [go to] a church and form relationships based on what other people are saying and what they are doing? [That] is weird to me.

Tom saw in the human mediation of "God's message" the potential for things thought to be fixed and clear, such as church doctrine and scriptural points of view, to in fact be interpretive and innately personal:

[T]he voice that delivers what God thinks is human. It's fallible, influenced by peers and society. So anytime I hear a pastor get up and preach, it's funny because I think every preacher opens themselves [and] becomes so vulnerable in that moment . . . [They] have opened a door into their world beginning with the topic they're using, the analogies they choose to use, all of that. It's . . . biographical.

Tom's description of the human influence on scriptural interpretation parallels constructionist theorizing of social life in that the social actor (here the pastor) is positioned as the arbiter of social reality; which represents a philosophically opposing view of the idea of Christian canon. Whereas the prevailing idea among black churches

is that scripture operates as a “revealed truth” of how to live (Douglas 2004), Tom appears to suggest that Biblical truth is not an objective reality, but a process by which church leaders narrate what they know about, how they view, and perceive Christian faith (see Best 2008; Weinberg 2008). Because Tom sees the social world and cultural repertoires of the black church as a function of the pastor’s own views and beliefs, he feels more at ease to challenge and criticize. In fact, he goes on to assess how he sees race as a primary factor shaping the cultural processes of the black church.

[Historically], the black preacher was probably the most educated person in the community . . . relative to the rest of the membership . . . or [at least] the most well read . . . So it was generally acceptable to take word from on high, from the pastor to be gospel truth because no one else really knew any better. You just trusted that this person who is perceived to be intelligent, well-spoken and all that is probably right because I don’t have the same educational background as they do. I haven’t read the same books. I might not even know how to read. I mean all these things, so there’s that power play and I think we carried that along for a long time and it became sort of the norm that in our polity, in our structures that the pastor is the HNIC⁷² and everybody else sort of takes directions. They called the shots. So that is how I’d probably explain the power dynamics historically.

Tom sees race as an important structure organizing the interpretive tradition of black churches. Educational inequalities, produced by white racism, create the circumstances by which black pastors may have received superior education, but have congregants who have access to less quality education. As a result, they may be less empowered to question or challenge the scriptural interpretations in black churches. There are some interesting scholarly arguments that support Tom’s assertions. Jewell (2007) points out that black churches (particularly in the south) formed in the post-bellum period were

⁷²HNIC or “Head Nigger in Charge” is a black colloquialism for indigenous leadership that asserts itself as unchallengeable or unquestionable.

greatly influenced by white missionaries who, concerned that large numbers of newly-freed blacks would challenge (or dismantle) white society, opened black institutions (schools and churches) intended to socialize blacks to white middle class values and norms. He notes that it was generally understood (by most whites, including the northern missionaries, but also by the middle class black congregations they created) that what distinguished both white and these newly formed churches from existing black churches was the superior levels of education held by their pastors and congregants. Griffin (2004a) adds that a predominant feature of white conquest was the use of biblical scripture. Among the major influences this had on the doctrine of black churches, he explains, was the promotion of (among other things) the idea of biblical authority and puritanical views of sexuality. Douglas (2004) explains the general lack of formal biblical knowledge among black churches differently. She states that blacks have since slavery expressed deep suspicion of the white man's bible. Noting that whites used scripture to enslave, conquer and oppress; and forbade blacks from learning to read, blacks developed a distrust of "book religion" in favor of an elaborate oral tradition of scriptural knowledge that emphasized narratives about faith, freedom and justice. This oral tradition has evolved into a uniquely black religious canon and cultural repertoire that has facilitated community and collective identity. However it might best be explained, it is clear that Tom's observations that race has been an important arbiter in not only the interpretation of scripture -- particularly on the issue of sexuality -- have merit. He goes on to note how this impacts the way that congregants relate to scripture.

Don't ask questions . . . just follow in line. It's a way of thinking and being in the world. That is a part of the history of being Black in America. And I think our

White peers don't come from that same tradition and have been able to question text in ways that—or they've been able to do this earlier or came to some of these conclusions a little bit faster because of . . . the way they were socialized. Unfortunately, Black people have not had that privilege historically.

Whether the factors that lead black church congregants to trust without question the scriptural interpretations of church leaders is the result of race-based educational inequalities in (as Tom implies); or a cultural practice of aural knowledge (as Douglas suggests); it is clear that black church members are likely to trust church leaders' interpretations of scripture; eschew academic study of scripture; and are unlikely to question text as it is presented to them. This practice appears to have become so intrinsic to church practice that even though it is possible for congregants to critically examine scriptures themselves, they are unlikely to avail themselves of this opportunity.

Oftentimes, people don't really know their Bibles. I mean we pick it up, we read it when a situation arises, [or] when we need inspiration or encouragement . . . No one really studies it. [Laughs] I mean like no one . . . And those who do, it's a very independent, self-guided study and it's not always the most—I'm hesitant to say this but I'm going to say it. It's not always the most informed. It's not really challenged a lot. You get around other people who think like you and you all read the same text and come up with the same conclusions . . . I don't think people necessarily push themselves in these issues. And then when they do start to ask questions, we tell them that's dangerous. That's not Bible. Be careful. Be careful how the devil may get involved in your thinking. But that's not the devil. That's critical thinking. We don't empower people to do this. And when they start doing it, we try to take power away from them and say those aren't the questions you should be asking.

Here, Tom suggests that the practice of not reading or critically studying the Bible is not only normative within black churches, but it is socially encouraged. This custom, functions as a form of social control in that perspectives that are evaluated as inconsistent with existing doctrine are denounced as heretical (or at least untrustworthy) in the staunchest terms. But it also possible to note in Tom's remarks, a conflation of the

failure to critically examine scripture with a less devout Christianity. Reading the Bible for inspiration or encouragement is made to seem less informative or intellectual by conflating it with the lack of critical study. We find a similar framing -- intellectual approaches to faith construed as more appropriately Christian, in contrast to emotional approaches to faith -- among the white missionaries discussed in Jewell's (2007) work. In that instance, white missionaries and the black congregants of the churches they built tended to distinguish themselves by asserting that their doctrine and worship was, like white churches, "more intellectual;" whereas the forms of worship found in most black churches was said to be more "emotional" and boisterous. In light of these claims, the missionaries and their congregants often noted that their pastors were highly educated; and that their sermons were grounded in the scriptures as opposed to emotional appeals to faith. Moreover, it is difficult to ignore the parallel between this and other strategies participants used to remediate prevailing cultural narratives of their sexual deviancy. The resort to intellectualism as a means to rescue a devalued social status is reminiscent the participant's use of elite gender discourses to counteract claims about their racial and gender inauthenticity. This cultural practice is a significant element of participants' counternarratives about race, faith and sexuality. "Jared," a 28 year old former divinity student who is currently teaching in the southeast, provides a strong critique of the church's role in knowledge production that builds on this intellectualism theme:

So I . . . view the church as Gil Scott-Heron said, as a nigger factory . [Laughs]
 One time I preached the message I said, "Do not make my personal relationship a matter of public relation." And it pissed people off . . . Stay out of my bedroom. Stay out of my life. My personal relationship with God is between me and God.

Jared's reference is to the book *The Nigger Factory* published in 1972 by musician and

spoken-word poet, Gil Scott-Heron. Inspired by the radicalization of black political thought during the late sixties, this fictional work chronicles a student uprising at a fictional, southern black college. The uprising, initiated by a militant student group dissatisfied with the assimilationist ideology by which the school is run, begins when the students request that the administration adopt a more racially conscious curriculum and practices. Unfortunately, these requests are perceived as threatening to the college and are met with resistance by faculty, administrators and even some students. By most accounts, *The Nigger Factory* is an expression of Scott-Heron's frustration with the failure of American higher education to respond to the changing racial climate in America. But it would be a mistake to read Scott-Heron's indictment of education as a general one. In setting the uprising and ideological inertia at a southern HBCU, the author directs his critique to other blacks; and to those black institutions he sees as complicit in the replication of white society. In fact, he says as much in the Author's Notes that precede the story:

Black colleges and universities have been both a blessing and a curse on Black people. The institutions have educated thousands of our people who have never had the opportunity to get an education otherwise. They have supplied for many a new sense of dignity and integrity. They have never, however, made anybody equal. This is a reality for Black educators everywhere as students all over America demonstrate for change . . . Fantasies about the American Dream are now recognized by Black people as hoaxes and people are tired of trying to become part of something that deprives them of the necessities of life even after years of bogus study in preparation for this union. A college diploma is *not* a ticket on the Freedom Train. It is, at best, an opportunity to learn about the systems that control life and destroy life: an opportunity to cut through the hypocrisy and illusion that America represents. New educational aspects must be discovered . . . The center of our intellectual attention must be thrust away from Greek, Western thought toward Eastern and Third World thought. Our examples in the arts must be Black and not white . . . The main trouble in higher education lies in the fact that while the times have changed radically, educators and

administrators have continued to plod along through the bureaucratic red tape that stalls so much American progress. We have once again been caught short while imitating the white boy. While knowledge accumulates at a startling pace our institutions are content to produce quasi-white folks . . . (Scott-Heron [1972] 2001:245-6).

Seen in this light, Jared's reference to *The Nigger Factory* is clearly intended, on the one hand, as a comment on the uncritical choices made by black churches to mimic white society. In this particular instance, he is in agreement with those scholars who see in the church's doctrine and ideology, an uncritical replication of white social norms (e.g. Butler 2004; Douglas 2004; Griffin 2004a, 2004b); and that this (like Lamarr and Jamie claim above) has the potential to thwart real social progress for blacks . But this commentary also draws upon elite discourses of "logic" and intellectualism. As a "Nigger Factory" the church suffers from an ineffectual and weak intellectualism. Consequently most participants found themselves at particular odds with the prevailing interpretations of scripture regarding sexuality, and organized a strong narrative response. For example, Lamarr comments on the irrationality of the church's view of sexuality.

There were a lot of things that . . . they said didn't make sense. Like when you listen to the arguments that were made, the logic in it didn't make sense. "Why would you lump me in murderers and pedophiles and all these people who do these bad things when I'm not hurting anybody?" And that was the realization and looking at that rationally is what started it, because I would look at it and say, "Oh, wait a minute, you just put me in line with a rapist." That's just—no, no, no, you know, that doesn't make logical sense whatsoever. And then I would look at it and say, "These are people who are trying to put things on me that are in their head and that's not reality, that's not the religion I grew up in."

In addition to expressing his frustration with the church's view on homosexuality, Lamarr denounces the ideology for its lack of intellectual potency. The emphasis on an

intellectual approach to faith remained a central theme of the participants' counter narratives against scriptural interpretations on homosexual deviancy. Challenging these narratives was a central objective of Tom's interview. He describes how access to divinity training armed him with the intellectual tools to deconstruct the church's account of homosexuality and to make peace with his faith and sexuality.

[I]n seminary, I was given the tools to really question the text and . . . once you gave me the tools, I mean I started to wield them in my own special way and I went after clobber text -- clobber text being passages in the Bible that people used to hit gay men and women over the head with to keep them in line. They say that being gay is bad and you should fall within this heteronormative spectrum. I would say there were about six of them . . . I sorta really questioned those texts and applying literary and cultural criticism to it. It's just, they didn't have the same weight over me that they used to have or they had prior to the seminary. And it makes sense now where those texts came from. Then it was coming to accept that maybe being gay isn't so bad, that there's a way of thinking about this that is scholarly and academic and I can apply that to my practices and think outside the traditional norms of this is just sin . . . It took me a minute to get it in my heart and that came with time in accepting myself for who I am and seeing other people do that, seeing other Christians in particular do that because I didn't want to be a heathen and I didn't want to just accept a concept or idea that could pull me or take me away from God.

Brad also pursued formal divinity training in order to gain more critical insight into scripture and the particular interpretations of sexuality that are common in the black church:

I decided I wanted to go to divinity school and learn; study religion in a way that it was more academic. Because I knew that a lot of what I had been taught was just bullshit. So it was like . . . I need to do my own work. I need to have my own journey. I can't -- this is not my father's faith. It was my faith, and I have to kind of figure it out for myself . . . During this time I had also started to become a critical thinker. I mean . . . I . . . read a lot . . . about religion, about Christianity, and . . . it raised a lot more questions . . . [A]ll of a sudden I am starting to realize that these were people who are writing shit down, and it wasn't divinely inspired . . . and then . . . that edifice started to crumble . . . What I've learned is that there are Christianities and that . . . the Bible's just this collection of books with radically different thinking and tensions and all of this stuff . . . I can't . . . just

accept this, because you said, “It’s the word of God,” or “Because the Bible says so,” or whatever. I just wasn’t buying that anymore.

For both Tom and Brad, reliance on an academic evaluation of scripture provides a critical eye; contextualizes scripture in a way that advances insights into the Bible’s meaning; but most importantly equips them to challenge scriptures typically used to condemn black homosexuality. It appears that these insights were critical to the development of authenticity and to transforming their self presentations from “sinner” to “devout Christian.” This privileging of advanced knowledge, or of “book learning,” with regards to faith seems also associated with having a more mature Christianity that is capable of seeing past the customary scriptural enhancements, on the topic of homosexuality to a greater “truth.” Biblical scholarship seems to have provided some support for this view. Douglas (2004) and Griffin (2004a) note that several scholars have argued that a critical reading of scripture in fact reveals little, if any, support for admonitions against same sex sexuality. Consequently, many participants describe having a new-found freedom to develop new insights on sexuality and their role in the church. Tom for example reflects on the possibility that there may be a way to reunify the body and the sacred.

[T]here are other ways of thinking about what glorifying God with our sexuality looks like . . . [R]eading books . . . freed me to accept myself as a sexual being and to explore . . . what does it mean to be a sexual being. I mean the church has taught us to suppress sexuality for so long . . . [to] just free myself . . . was a big deal. And I still kind of wrestle with that today. I mean, what does it mean to be faithful as a gay man, . . . to be a faithful sexual being in society? . . . [W]e don’t have to play by the traditional rules of heteronormativity.

“Henry,” a 54 year old non-profit administrator living in the midwest offers a more concise and direct account of his efforts to frame his sexuality in terms that reunify the

sacred and the body:

I've . . . thought that my orientation; that who am I is God given.

The conviction that personal sexuality can have religious purpose also shapes Clinton's perspective of himself:

The otherness that I've experienced in my life, I think to some degree there's some designed piece to it. I'm not saying that God has caused me to suffer. I'm just saying that God is using me . . . I think that's how God uses me. It's difficult, it's painful, it's hurtful, it's beautiful, it's lovely, it's amazing . . . This is the work that God gives me.

Clinton, Henry and Tom assert the need for Christianity to be liberated from heteronormative rules of sexuality as not only compatible with religious devotion, but as an intrinsic or divinely inspired state of being. In making this claim, there is once again an association of (homo)sexuality with devout, orthodox religious expression. Scholars considering the issue of (homo)sexuality and the church have also proposed a need for reconciliation of the sacred and the body as a way for black churches to reclaim an innately Afrocentric religious worldview that has been diminished as a result of white racism. Smith (2004) has suggested that uncovering the influence of white supremacy on black church traditions (a practice which seems to have been generally employed by these participants), can foster new religious discourses that are no longer dependent on "the white man's bible" and its limited view of human sexuality. Anderson (2004) advocates for a new black theology. He, and other scholars (Antonio 2004; Earl 2004; Griffin 2004b), claim that a sex-negative theology only contributes to white efforts to devalue the black body. Douglas (2004) asserts that finding the sacred in all things (as part of God's creation) is consistent with African theological traditions that see the

divine in all aspects of creation and thus make little distinction between what is and is not “God’s.” Such views, she suggests, are slowly being reclaimed by some black Christian congregations, and implicit in this effort to transform religious discourse, are opportunities to transform ideologies and practices regarding (homo)sexuality. Butler (2004) claims that constructing a black theology rooted on white ideals of sexuality has bifurcated the black psyche in ways that are inconsistent with African spiritual traditions that see no separation between the sacred and the secular. He suggests that reuniting the two elevates the idea of human connections, and the value of community. This may explain why Tom, for example, advocates for the absence of sexual suppression in favor ideologies that support sexual exploration and investigating the source of sexual norms in his remarks. Clinton goes on to describe the particular role that gays and lesbians might play within black churches, that goes beyond the practical roles black gay men have been noted to play within black congregations.

I do believe there's a spiritual undercurrent to homosexuality . . . I think gays and lesbians are two- spirited people. We're sent here for a particular purpose . . . We're meant to be in between—I call it in betweener . . . We're here to serve in a support capacity. All the other people who don't fit at those, who fit at the extremes: male/female, black/white, up/down, poor/rich, you know, Jamaican/American; Italian/American. We belong to the middle space and that middle space is where the spirit of God dwells. And that's how God breaks into this world and it is our job to help God to manifest itself in this world.

Clinton goes on to explain this association of “in-betweeners” with gays and lesbians being the result of gays and lesbians existing in the social space between what is categorically male and female. He implies that as a result of this condition, gays and lesbians in the church have the potential to teach others about insider/outsider status and the dynamics of social power. His comments parallel those made by scholars (e.g.

Aguirre 2000; Han 2008; Matsuda 1987) who suggest that the narratives told by those existing in socially marginalized locations offer alternative interpretations, unofficial accounts, and insight into existing social arrangements and institutional practices that facilitate discrimination and oppression. Embedded within these particular counter stories of faith, race and sexuality are insights into how and where church practices and ideologies facilitate white supremacist notions of sexuality and the devaluation of black bodies. Ultimately the revelation of these influences creates possibilities for authenticity and inclusion for gay congregants. Clinton concludes:

I think gay people have a special charge to manifest spirit, to move people to other levels of experience and I think that's why so many of us are in church because we're trying to live out an ancient paradigm for which there is no present form for it to fit, no more than our own flesh. There are no structures, no institutions and I could say the paradigm isn't there anymore . . . The closest thing most of us can find to it is the church.

Clinton proposes that the religious and social insights that black gays and lesbians can offer, places them in a unique relationship to the church. He, like other participants, assigns a prophet-like status to black gays and lesbians suggesting that their special relationship to the Divine affords them new theological insights. While he believes these revelations (and undoubtedly the cultural practices they support) to be a new expression of religious faith, scholars have suggested that they may in fact be quite old, and reflect ideas that were at one time once intrinsic to the black experience, but have since been lost to white influences on the church. Thus what may on its face appear to simply be a debate over the place of black gays and lesbians in the church is in fact a contest over the terms of black religious belonging and collective identity. Black gay men's challenges to the cultural repertoires that organize their exclusion from black churches reveal how

white racism organizes the terms and nature of this debate in ways that may not be evident to church leaders and congregants. Moreover their counter narratives expose how the church, despite it's best intentions to remediate the social construction of black men and women in American life, has become complicit in promoting a white view of black sexuality, and in limiting the possibilities for black sexuality has become a central player in constructing the exclusion of black gays and lesbians from both religious and racial communities. In this regard Clinton and others may be correct, black gays and lesbians do have much to share; and may be the strongest advocates for black churches to reclaim an worldview that can truly liberate it from "the white mans' bible" and create a more sex-positive space for everyone.

CONCLUSION

Recent news events have once again highlighted the sheer number of unresolved issues in the black church regarding the question of homosexuality. One of the most outspoken anti-gay church leaders, accused of having a history of clandestine sexual encounters with young, male congregants has generated debate about the validity of the accusations; the probability that men of faith can also be gay; what role black churches and communities play in constructing the closet; whether or not gays and lesbians can hope to ever be welcomed in black churches; and if such environments did exist, would they potentially eliminate the potential for scandals of this type to occur? In the context of what is often portrayed as intractable and incompatible ideological positions, I was

drawn to question not only why these participants choose to stay and struggle so desperately to remain connected to faith when so many gays and lesbians simply avoid Christianity, if not religion altogether? I was also interested to understand how those who do stay create and maintain the connections they fight so hard to hold on to. I was fortunate to discover answers to both questions in these data.

Why do they stay? In these accounts I learned that despite encountering a number of church practices and ideological points of view that alienate black gay men from black Christian churches; for many participants, faith is difficult if not impossible to disentangle from collective black identity. As faith is said to have its deepest expression only in context of community relationships and obligations, many black gay men struggle to resolve the tensions they experience between their faith and sexuality. The reward for successful resolution appears to be authenticity. Simply put, to be separate from church jeopardizes not only the Christian identity, but the racial one as well. As a result, many black gay men have a strong incentive to remain a part of the communities they have come to rely upon for its cultural repertoires of what it means to be Christian identity and what it means to be black. As Calhoun-Davis (2008) theorized, staying facilitates a social project of racial visibility and coherence. Staying enables the production of strong ties, and possibility of meaningful integration within these communities. Notably, the effort to remain is only moderately radical in the end. While participants describe the desire to their sexuality affirmed and not condemned by their religious peers, they do not seek to fully dismantle Christian doctrine – only to challenge the narratives that construct them as deviant sinners.

Understanding the details of this challenge answers the question of how they manage to stay. These personal accounts reveal an elaborate counter narrative that exposes the socially constructed nature of church doctrine. By privileging an academic approach to scriptural interpretation, the participants gain both insights and permission to criticize the church's existing repertoires. These critiques have tended to emphasize white influences on black church doctrine and cultural practices which consequently produce an overall theology that fails to celebrate the black body or black sexuality. Hence some participants see the church as not simply complicit in the production of homophobic attitudes, but in the reification of white sexual mores. Notably, black gay men's narrative efforts to respond to these limiting ideologies uncover a cultural repertoire that appears unique to their narratives of resistance. The men frequently appeal to intellectualism over emotionalism and uncritical reading of scripture and narrate themselves as almost prophet-like. Whereas these accounts remediate their portrayal as heretical sinners, they strongly parallel their hegemonic accounts of their masculine prowess in response to challenges to their gender authenticity. Thus, the strategic use of elite categories appears to consistently be valuable tools in the effort to redefine themselves. But as with gender, the men seem less interested in wielding the cultural and ideological tools of social dominance to achieve power over others, but to successfully integrate themselves within existing black communities. This lends empirical support to Calhoun-Davis' (2008) claims that identities are contextually regulated and thus how we present ourselves may be determined by the setting, context, political objectives and personal agency as well as the structural available for its

construction. Here, the narrators don't wish to eliminate Christianity or blackness per se, but to be seen as worth of inclusion. Thus, their narrative efforts rely on these existing cultural resources for producing black and Christian identities, even as they produce a counter narrative that challenging their representation as sexually immoral, sinners, and separate from the black church community.

While these accounts have broadly dealt with the experience of faith and religious inclusion, they fundamentally reveal a story of race. The intersectional and narrative approaches used here were valuable for understanding how race has shaped the complex cultural productions that animate the tensions between black churches' and their black gay and lesbian congregants. Ultimately the story is more intricate than acknowledging how respectability politics shapes the exclusion of gay parishioners, we must also consider how white ideology infiltrates all social institutions where it insidiously structures patterns of social resistance. Piven and Cloward (1978) once noted that it is inherent in the nature of power to control of the means of social coercion, the means of production, as well as what and how people think. An outcome of this hegemonic order is that those in power also organize the settings, forms and impact of others' resistance. This explanation seems fitting for understanding how, despite the suspicion of black Christians to white biblical claims, the white inspired aims of heteronormativity remain popular in church doctrine. This speaks to the resiliency and pervasiveness of organizing structures and says much about the multidimensional implications of race.

CHAPTER VII

LEAVING HOME BUT STAYING PUT:
A SUBVERSIVE TALE OF RACIAL KINSHIP

“Steve” is a 65 year old retired librarian living in the northeast. While he can recall having same-sex attractions as early as high school, the social and legal consequences of acknowledging or acting upon these feelings during the 50s and early 60s⁷³ delayed his sexual awakening until he had graduated from college – and even then, his fear led him to be extremely cautious when meeting other men. As a consequence of developing a gay identity during a time of such extreme sexual conservatism, much of Steve’s sexual career has been lived in silence. He explains that if directly asked about his sexuality, he will not hide who he is, but he does not elect to generally publicly disclose this information. In fact, his sexuality remains an “open secret” among immediate family members (a mother and four sisters), but is not widely known among extended family. As a result, he has generally avoided attending his semi-annual family reunions in order to avoid fielding inquiries about his relationship status.

Several years ago, Steve independently began researching his family genealogy. He eventually managed to produce a comprehensive account of his family’s history

⁷³ Adam (1995) explains that by the 1950s most municipalities had formulated laws which criminalized homosexual behavior. Private parties and bars which catered to same sex socializing could be unexpectedly raided by police, leading to the arrest of patrons. It was not uncommon for press to accompany police on these raids where arrested men would be photographed, and their names sometimes “leaked,” and then published in the paper. Consequently many men’s lives were destroyed as the public disclosure of one’s homosexual activities could result in the loss of family and employment. In fact, by the mid-1950s, McCarthyist fervor led the U.S. Civil Service Commission to begin rooting out “sexual perverts” from all areas of federal employment believing them to be a radical threat to government stability (see also Bernstein 2002; and Engel 2001).

dating back to the post-bellum period. He unofficially published the information and distributed it among immediate and extended family. A few months later, he was contacted by a family member who proffered a personal invitation to attend that year's family reunion. Though he was initially hesitant, he did eventually agree to attend. During the event he described being relieved at the relatively welcoming and warm reception he received. His feelings of connection and acceptance by family were amplified when near the end of the event, family members held a formal presentation in his honor. They produced a cake, sang to him, and expressed thanks and appreciation to him for "bringing the family closer" through his research. Steve describes this as a real turning point in his relationship with his extended family. For years, his sexuality created a reason to keep a moderate social distance from family members for fear of experiencing condemnation or rejection. Instead, given the opportunity, he found his family eager to make him feel accepted and integrated within the family network.

Steve's personal account of the shift in his connection to family also marked a significant turning point in my relationship to these data. While in Chapters I and III, I shared a variety of hegemonic tales that structure both real and perceived cleavages in the active participation of black gay men in black communities, Steve's account exposes what has been a prominent theme throughout the counter narratives we have discussed thus far – the effort to remain connected to black communities, and the role that race plays in shaping their overall experience of sexuality. For example, the Super Black Man (SBM) performances and discourses explored in Chapter V not only remediate the punk, sissy and faggot portrayals of black gay men, they also endeavor to integrate black gay

men within the broader construction of “authentic” black manhood. Moreover, black gay men’s narrative challenges to the cultural repertoires of the black church not only remediates their construction as sexual deviants and sinners, but incorporates them within communities of faith (and by extension, black communities as well) as authentic Christians.

Scholars have begun to articulate a more pronounced role for race in the sexual identities of gays and lesbians of color. Green (2007a), for example, has argued that black gay men’s relationships to core racial institutions – particularly the family and the church – exert enormous influence on the “sexual practices and intimate dyadic relationships . . . [that] arise, stabilize and are transformed over the life history of” individual black gay men (p. 755). Moore (2009) found that race (and class) background significantly shapes the expectations black lesbians have for their partnerships. While they claim to value equity in the distribution of household tasks and responsibilities, in practice they place a higher value on the economic independence of their partners in ways that parallel the relationship patterns and dynamics they experience growing up in black families.

While these authors claim to acknowledge the importance of race for structuring the experience of sexuality, I argue that it is possible to extend this analysis more extensively. For example, Green (2007a) only sees racial institutions as creating a patterned “deep-cutting push” that only alienates black gay men from black communities (p. 754); but does not acknowledge the ways that these institutions (as Steve’s account suggests) also exert strong inclusive influences on the lives and experiences of black gay

men. While Moore (2009) sees race as creating “alternative histories and experiences” for gays and lesbians of color in ways that contrast sharply with what researchers have documented about predominantly white, middle class lesbian and gay populations; her work makes only the most limited claims about how race shapes sexuality. This is not because the work explores only black lesbian relationships, but because it only examines expectations for the distribution of responsibilities in those relationships as opposed to looking at broader (e.g. identity; social and political organizing, or the creation of shared cultural repertoires) or multiple phenomena. In light of these limitations, this chapter explores expressions of racial kinship within participant’s counter narratives. Here I demonstrate moments where race is identified as a central aspect of their overall identity; and as structuring their relationship to mainstream gay identity and communities. In stark contrast to Green’s (2007a) assertions, I also document participants’ longings for inclusion within black communities, and the patterned process by which they (and their family members) work to remain essential members of these communities. I begin this discussion with participants’ accounts of the factors that structure the “deep-cutting push” which Green (2007a) describes. I attempt to demonstrate how these factors set up the dynamics by which participants work to remain integrated within their black families and communities. I close with some reflections on what these new insights may suggest about our understanding of race and sexuality.

LEAVING HOME: THE INSTITUTIONAL PUSH OUT OF BLACK COMMUNITIES

There has been a great deal of empirical and anecdotal data to suggest that many black gay men experience tension between their racial and sexual identities. In earlier chapters, I've demonstrated that black homosexuality has been construed as incompatible with the objectives of respectability (and hence black social progress), dangerous for black families, and as fundamentally immoral. Black gay men have been portrayed as secretive predators; as tragic figures; and as inauthentically black. Underlying many of these conflicts appears to be a fundamental conviction that homosexuality is incompatible with blackness. "Barry," a 43 year old public health researcher in living in the northeast, describes this prevailing view within black communities which associates homosexuality with whiteness.

[B]y being gay there are people in your community, in your racial/ethnic community, they don't really see you as being fully Black . . . So it's just a -- it's f**ked up kind of -- it just really sort of gets at some problematic kinds of things . . . [T]his idea that homosexuality is somehow European phenomena, and that Black people would never -- it seems like Africans never had sex with men, they never have sex with men, and that you've been infected with some sort of virus or whatever; [as if] somehow these are mutually exclusive categories.

Brad perceives these views as constructing a powerfully alienating force in the lives of black gay men that separates them from black communities. Scholars have explained the alienating nature of this ideology to be rooted in a presumption that there is no evidence of homosexual behavior in Africa; concerns about the generativity of black families; anxiety about white racism and the need for black social progress. Thus, adherents of this view have been quick to assert that homosexuality is exogenous to the black

experience, a vestige of whites' encounter with blacks and thus see those who engage in such behaviors as being complicit with "the white genocidal plot" to destroy black communities (see Douglas 2004; Ongiri 1997; Riggs 1991; Thomas 2007; Welsing 1991).

"Howard," a 42 year old public health consultant living in the northeast explains that one consequence of this ideology is that it produces a culture and social invisibility for black gays and lesbians

I don't know. I just don't know . . . I'm guessing that it is still a sense of shame, because there is sort of just disconnected and now I even talk about my own mother in that. If you were to ask her today given all that she knows, because when I came out to her, when I was 24, 25, I was dating somebody that I stayed with for 11 years, and you know I came out to her, very early in the course of that relationship, and then—so she knew us, she spend holiday's with us. You know all the rest of it. I leave that relationship and I move to Boston, and I have this six-year relationship, and within the course of that six-year relationship, you know my mother liked him more than she liked the one I was with for 11 years. So our mother's would talk to one another. My mother gave the eulogy at his mother's funeral, but if you ask my mother, is your son gay? Her response would be he says he is. So she will not say those words. I've seen her have gay friends. I've seen her, be extremely compassionate to friends that she has worked with that have died of AIDS. I've seen her, be disgusted by families, who have disowned their children that are sick and dying from AIDS. I've seen her be very proud of the work that I do, and, she has been there for even gay friends whose parents disowned them. But if you ask her, is your son gay, and I actually had a woman tell me this. I asked your mother that question, and she said well, he says he is, and I laughed and I said yeah, because I was like—yeah I told her, you know my brother's gay and then she says is your son gay? Well, he says he is . . . I don't know if she is ashamed to say it.

Despite the nearly twenty years that have transpired since Howard had disclosed his sexuality to his mother, her personal relationship with his former partner of 11 years (and a subsequent partner for 6 years), a number of her own gay friends, and a personal philosophy of accepting gay family members, Howard's mother continues to have

difficulty publically acknowledging his sexuality. His association of this behavior with some form of shame suggests that the impulse to not acknowledge black homosexuality is rooted in a belief in the immorality of the behavior. This belief (and the practice of being silent on the matter of black sexuality) is both characteristic and pervasive among black Christian churches (see Pitt 2010a, 2010b). Its appearance within the broader black community suggests strong empirical support for scholarly work that has demonstrated that the cultural practices and ideologies of the black church are implicated in notions of collective black identity and cultural norms (see Barnes 2005; Bounds-Littlefield 2005; Patillo-McCoy 1998). But it is also worth noting that this particular practice of silence is, as Sedgwick ([1990] 2008) theorized, a decisive social act meant to not only construct (and police) the boundaries of heteronormativity, but structures the invisibility of black homosexuals.

“Gregory” is a retired federal employee in his late fifties who resides in the southeast. Like Steve, his awareness of his sexuality occurred during a historical moment when silence and hiding one’s homosexuality was both normative and pragmatic. As a result, he confirms that in his own family, it became common practice to simply ignore his sexuality.

I never brought any friends home, rarely brought friends home, so that really would have stood out. So, yeah, they just don’t discuss it . . . [E]ither she doesn’t know or she is ignoring it or hopes she can reform me or something, but it’s never discussed, nothing sexual is ever discussed . . . [T]hat’s the way it is.

Gregory demonstrates that one consequence of this culture of silence is that it fractures the relationship between gay and lesbians and their families. In this instance, the family’s silence about his sexuality led him to keep his relationships a secret from family

members, and to generally suspect the condemnation or rejection of family members.

““Bryan,” a 22 year old communications specialist from the southwest in describing why it is easier to come out at work than to family, suggests that the black community’s silence around homosexuality and the suspicions it generates can develop into a broader fear that coming out places the entire family relationship at risk.

I could be disowned but I can’t be fired, not because of this. I could be disowned on those grounds but I can’t be fired on those grounds . . . I don’t have much stake. I don’t have anything to lose. *So it’s more important to come out to family because it’s like there’s something to lose there?* Yeah. *And what is it that you feel like you might lose?* Maybe they don’t want to deal with me anymore, that sort of thing. It’s just being disowned, just overall being disowned. I mean financially, I can support myself. I mean just being—just kicked to the curb, you know.

Barry describes how these tensions generate, for many black gay men, a need to leave home and their home communities

So I made the choice to go to high to junior high in high school away from home, because I think it's funny how you make decisions, even when you don't necessarily have the consciousness of why *you're* doing what *you're* doing. I think for me, I made the decision to go to school away from home, because I had the sense that it might be somewhat easier for me in terms of the whole gender thing . . . [I think that] part of the journey of a lot of gay men is that you leave home and that’s what [coming to this city] was. I mean it’s like okay, I go to Divinity School I am going to be gay. I am not going to be hiding, I can’t. I am not going to do that. So [this city] afforded me the opportunity to come here as a gay man -- I was not going to hide anything.

Under these circumstances (silence, suspicion and fear) home becomes associated with gender norms and performative expectations that are so limiting, that Barry felt could only be mitigated by leaving home. But in addition to alleviating the pressures innate to the gender and sexual norms of the black community, leaving home afforded Barry the opportunity to finally live more authentically without having to suppress or hide his

sexuality. Barry perceives this escape from black community norms to be an experience common to all black gay men and notably, the experience of leaving home in order to openly express one's sexuality was a frequent topic of participants' interviews. Nearly 60% of those interviewed described resisting or suppressing their same-sex inclinations until they had left home, and/or a predominantly black community. Most characterized their new-found freedom as an opportunity to immerse themselves in gay culture (both mainstream and black gay subcultures) leading to first time experiences with gay clubs and bars, gay magazines and politics, dating and sexual encounters.

Consistent with Green's (2007a) empirical claims, these participants also describe patterned experiences of being "pushed out" of black communities. An ideology that considers homosexuality to be shameful and incompatible with black identity largely organizes these experiences and renders black homosexuals invisible. It also creates a strong impulse for black gays and lesbians to hide or suppress their sexuality out of an expectation of rejection or condemnation from their families and communities. The pressure of hiding and the fracture it creates culminates in some black gay men choosing to separate themselves from their black communities and families in order to live openly. While these experiences are without a doubt, a function of cultural practices and ideologies of collective black identity, the participants did not describe black racial norms as exerting only negative influences on their lives. In the following section, I explore in detail how race also anchors black gay men to black communities.

STAYING PUT: THE INSTITUTIONAL PULL INTO BLACK COMMUNITIES

Racial identity, or being black, was important to the majority of the men I interviewed. Eighty-seven percent of respondents described their racial identity as black or African American and an additional 8% characterized themselves as Afro-Caribbean. While their individual stories differ, Steve's account poignantly articulates the magnitude to which race plays a defining role in the identities of most participants:

Well, my identity is African-American first, and so that sort of sets the pattern and then being gay is a dimension of being an African-American. So I think the racial identity is like 90% and then the--no not at 90, 60% or 70% and the sexual orientation is a more much smaller of influence. *In what way then would you see being a Black gay man as unique or different from just being--from that of other Black people?* It's overwhelmingly similar, the differences are rather small.

The 90-60% window by which Steve measures the importance of race in his life, provides the strongest insight into its relative importance. When Steve describes his life as not overwhelming dissimilar from that of other black people, he also makes plain that despite being gay, he fundamentally sees himself as a member of the black community. This was also true for "Brent," a 36 year old college administrator from the Midwest.

For many of us, at least certainly for me, I couldn't deny my Blackness if I wanted to really. I could act like I'm not, I could not identify as Black but [other people] would identify me as Black. I think . . . that history is also mine. There were gay people who were enslaved and there were gay civil rights activists who were Black. So this is as much my history and it is as rich for me as it is for any African American straight person.

Brent does not, and cannot conceptualize his sexuality as constructing him separate from black identity. He sees his race as impossible to ignore because it is so obvious, and because he is so readily defined by race, he articulates his personal claim to the history

and legacy of black struggle in America. For Brent being gay cannot separate him from this legacy, because black gay people have always existed as part of it. “DJ,” a 37 year old unemployed black gay man living in northeast also provides a racially conscious to describe the central role that race plays in organizing his life experiences.

[H]aving been born when I was born, where integration was just starting out, I’ve seen what racism is. And I’ve tried to – I don’t want people to be militant, but I certainly want them to understand that it does exist and that we are different. When you’re black, you’re different from being white. And to try to say that we’re all the same, it’s b.s. I think that we need to realize that there is a definite identity that’s related to the color of your skin . . . And so, like I said, not matter how many people I would date from other countries or other colors, I still have an identity with being black.

For DJ, being black is more than just a personal identity, it organizes how he understands the world, group relations, and social power. He recognizes that race creates a unique experience for him, and that it shapes his interactions with other racial groups – even when he dates. A similar level of racial consciousness also leads “Clinton,” a 44 year old unemployed counselor living in the southeast, to feel socially distant from anyone who is not a person of color. He describes having a strong affinity for other people of color, predicated on similar or shared experiences of racial subordination.

I feel a distance period. Whether there’s another man of color, Latino, Asian or whatever, I just feel a distance. I feel more an affinity for Black gay men or Black lesbian. But that’s a racial issue . . . Because I’m like—we probably got more in common . . . So there’s a natural affinity, there’s probably more out of racial identity, racial experience is probably more . . . And that’s not to dismiss somebody because they’re White, it’s because if you are a person of color in this country, this world, I know you had seen something. That’s where the affinity comes from . . . I feel you on some level.

The significance of race in participant’s lives was not only described in general terms.

Some referenced particular connections as playing an important role in how they defined

themselves, or came to appreciate the way that race operates in their lives. Gregory makes specific mention of the value placed on family life in black communities and how this shapes the experience of coming out. Feagin and McKinney (2003) have described the black family as an important socializing agent that helps members to recognize, make sense of, and develop productive responses to white racism. Thus black families – both immediate and extended – provide members support, a buffer against racism, a positive sense of identity and self-esteem.

The emphasis on family in the Black community is probably greater than most segments of the White community. The family is very, very important and having a family and having the family accept you, and having your own family, there is a lot of pressure to do that; have kids and so forth. There's this whole difference in coming out within the Black community than there it is in the White community and maybe it's based in reality, maybe not.

Feagin (2009, 2006) provides valuable insight into both these broad and specific racial claims. He suggests that these identifiable patterns in the men's ideologies and attitudes about race can be attributed to the system of race in America. Feagin (2006) notes that this system creates a hierarchical racial order, structures group relations, and produces unequal racial relations. These conditions produces shared patterns of experiences with inequality and white supremacy that are common to black people (see also Feagin & McKinney 2003; or Feagin & Sikes 1994). The system also produces an organized series of racial perspectives or frames, which Feagin (2009) describes as an “overarching worldview . . . [that] encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions, and interpretations” that are animated by narratives, characters and plotlines regarding racial phenomenon (p. 3). Within this system, Feagin (2009) observes a collection of black racial frames that function as a unique black world view which incorporates long-held

African customs and ideologies; strategies of resistance; and survival techniques for white racism. Thus innate to the black racial frame are the forms of racial consciousness we see demonstrated by these participants which includes understanding oneself as a racial being, and the role that race plays in one's life.

In part because these men define themselves in such clear racial terms (but also because of their experiences with racism in mainstream gay communities), many black gay men do not experience themselves as a part of white gay culture. "David," is a 26 year old public health researcher from the northeast. He describes the general disconnect he feels from the white gay community.

I do not reject the white gay community, but . . . I don't identify with it . . . I think that the gay community is . . . just like America itself. Which is, not everyone in America is racist, but white America is a racist place. Gay white America is the same place too . . . I wouldn't say that I feel that black gay men are embraced. [Yeah,] I probably wouldn't say that I feel that minority gay men, period, are embraced by the white gay community. I think that's why you see these groups breaking off. You see black gay men together. You see Latino gay men and Asian gay men with their social groups. Because, not only that it's important to support those identities, but because there is absolutely no support . . . [T]here's a difficulty in being black and being gay in the white gay community.

David's black racial framing leads him to note parallels between the racism he experiences generally and the anti-black attitudes and practices he experiences within gay communities. Claims of racial bias in the broader gay community have been made by scholars and activists alike (Altman 1982; Boykin 1996; Lewis & Stevens, 1996; McBride 2005; Vaid 1995). Scholars (e.g. Bernstein 2002; Jenness 1995; McBride 2005; Vaid, 1995) have observed that mainstream gay and lesbian politics, social spaces and media have been dominated by white men and images; and explained that pervasive white privilege within GLBT communities has significantly alienated or excluded most

gays and lesbians of color (Adam 1995; Jackson 1995; Vaid 1995). As a result, David understands white racism to have created the need for gays and lesbians of color to create their own social spaces both as an affirmation of their identities, and in resistance to the racism. Thus, Green's (2007a) claims that black gay men experience uneven or incomplete integration into mainstream gay community is a function of the racism that exists within the community.

The combined experience of alienation from black communities, and of not being fully integrated within gay communities, has strong emotional consequences. Participants frequently expressed a desire for association and shared community. For example, Clinton describes having such feelings and their being rooted in a strong sense of loss:

99% of us want to belong somewhere, want to belong somewhere. And if you're Black and you know racism for what it is, if you get rejected out of Black community, where are you going? So, what you going to do? You know you like men. You like dick. Whatever you do, you think you gonna tell everybody and be ostracized? Where you can't go to grandma's house no more? Where you can't go back to your old neighborhood? And if they ain't talking about you like a dog, you're liable to get your ass killed. You can't go in to church no more and sing because not only are you a punk-faggot and a sissy, [but] you told it in public and you know that's a serious taboo in the Black community. If you feel like you're going to lose everything, your grandmother, your mother, your dad, your job, your status in the community, everything that has made you who you are. If you're in fear that you're going to lose that, you would do a whole lot of damn thing, hold on to it.

Alienation from family and black community has taken a heavy toll on Clinton who characterizes the experience of coming out as not only a violation of community norms and expectations, but as completely disorienting. The loss of his "racial footing" in light of the prominent role that race plays in the lives and experiences of black gay men is

described as difficult if not impossible to recover from. As a consequence, many participants, once alienated expressed a strong desire for greater connection to black people. “Rabbit,” is a 37 year old restaurant worker from the northeast who feels as if his bond with the black community is inadequate:

So, my sense of black community (moans) I wish it could be stronger. I think more now that I ever did.

Brad, experiences his disconnection most poignantly with respect to heterosexual black men:

In terms of relationships with Black men, other Black men, particularly straight Black men . . . I think emotionally there is a kind of healing that isn’t about sort of just thinking the right way. It’s about something far deeper, and yeah; and less about logic and more about heart. I think that’s the journey for me, is getting to that in a very real way. *So you feel like you are still in process with connecting to other Black men?* . . . Absolutely. Yeah. Your mind is constantly embracing, you are feeling like you are f**ked up, nobody loves you. Black people don't love you, White people don't love you, you are just kind of f**ked every way.

“Henry,” a 54 year old non-profit administrator living in the midwest held a strong conviction for gay and lesbian visibility within black communities. Henry saw in greater visibility a way to challenge the cultural silence regarding homosexuality, and improve upon the existing animosity between black gays and lesbians and the larger black community. He stated:

It’s important for me on several levels. I think sometimes when you talk about same gender attracted, LGBT people, particularly within our own community, within the black community, within the Latino community, within communities of color, I certainly think that they automatically of white gay people. And so we are often the elephant in the room we’re there – and so I’m very much into being out and open wherever I am, particularly within my community – to let them know, I’m family too and I’ve always been family. And we got other members of the family so that they acknowledge that and affirm that too. That’s been important for me to be not only in my own family, my own family of origin, but in the family of choice . . . I think it’s important for people to know that when

they talk about the gay community that it includes some of the people that they are sitting across the table from, people who are already a members of their family, people they attend church with, people their working with. They need to know that they're talking about people like me.

Henry sees the enhanced visibility of black gays and lesbians as a chance to emphasize the connections and commonalities that make them a part of the black community and to dispel the prevailing ideology that homosexuality is a fundamentally white phenomenon. Proponents of intergroup contact theory, while not generally applied to studies of sexuality but to studies of inter-group race relations, have tended to agree that sustained, cooperative small group and individual-level interactions across categories of difference can improve pre-existing negative attitudes and prejudices (Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In this instance, Henry believes that the shared experience of race can create the positive and cooperative interactions that might result in improving understanding and acceptance between black gays and lesbians and their heterosexual family members and friends. Valuing visibility as a way to improve community and/or family relations appeared in several participants accounts as a motive for coming out to family. Barry, describes that having left home to live more openly and authentically, that it became difficult to sustain a relationship with his family predicated on him hiding his sexuality

I came out in a letter . . . I was about to graduate from Divinity School. It had been four years since I left [home]. I chose to come out . . . out at that time because I felt like I didn't want my family showing up and me having to straighten the house or do anything like that. I felt like when I moved to [this city], as a gay man, I just cannot -- I cannot go back in.

Once out, it was impossible for Barry to act as though he was ashamed of his sexuality.

Once he came out to his family, as contact theorists might have hypothesized, he found that this produced more intimate and honest interactions with family members.

I mean I think what it opened up was -- I mean it's hard to be around people when you can't be fully present. So I would just rather not be around you if I've got to hide this aspect of my life, because I am not sharing all of myself. So it made it easier . . . because of what I told her, she was able to share with me, and I remember her saying, she said, I am telling you this because I know you will understand. So, that's the gift of sort of bringing more of yourself, the message you can bring to a relationship is that people also, you give people permission to be honest about who they are and their story, and their pain, and their journey.

The experience of coming out improving his family relationships was also shared by

Brent

I came out to my mother when I was in graduate school and she was wonderful and said that she thought as much of me after I told her as she ever had, and went on about why I had not told her before, and she would have liked to have been able to be supportive and those kinds of things. She was really, really great and really accepting. And I don't think that it came from any great place of enlightenment. I think it from love. And really by love . . . I mean that sort of condition so strong that it moves you. And I think that she really had such a strong connection to her family . . . She didn't have to analyze it. It was clear. I was her son, and if I was gay, then gay was okay. Period

"TJ," is a 26 year old clerical worker living in the southeast who also believed that coming out to his family enhanced the quality of those relationships:

[M]y mom . . . she raised us to be very open. I mean, she's even said, I remember, as far as I remember, she said like she don't care who we choose to love, just make sure its forever . . . I've heard stories of people's parent's having to go to the hospital, or passing out when they come out, to their uncles beating them up. So I was just like, I need to tell my family . . . But during the conversation [I hesitated and stalled for so long until] . . . she's like "are you gay or something?" and I just started crying. I got so overwhelmed with emotion that I just started crying . . . And she was like, "Are you?" And then like at that point, because I was crying, I was like "yes" (said in a sobbing voice) . . . She was like, "TJ . . . I've always known . . . Is that what you had to tell me?" I was like . . . "Yes ma'am." She was like, "Boy I've always known that. You know what you

need to do in your life? You need to hold your head up high and you go do what you need to do . . . I'm not mad at you. I'm not mad at myself, because I know there was nothing I could do about it."

Participants accounts of coming out to family, share some important characteristics regarding the operation of race in their lives. First, is that the intimate connections created by this practice appear to play heavily on the family bonds that have been demonstrated to define and be unique to black communities. While in these instances family members responded positively to the news of a gay son (an outcome that was not true for all participants), despite TJ's claims to the contrary, there were no hospital trips, beatings, or children irrevocable ruptures to the family bond. Second, as was demonstrated in participants' accounts of achieving authenticity in black churches, the experience of authenticity and coherence is only possible within the context of positive social relations. Thus coming out only has purpose and meaning in the context of finding connection to black families and communities.

Seeking out and building an authentic relationship with family and friends was not the only way that black gay men enacted a racialized practice or custom that appeared to ground them in families and the larger black community. Many participants described regularly drawing upon perspectives, strategies, practices and/or interpretations which they would associate with a black racial frame, when responding to or negotiating challenges related to their sexuality. For example "Xavier," a senior academic administrator in his late thirties living on the west coast, identifies this pattern of analysis in his own life.

I think that there's something about our makeup honestly that's intrinsically to us . . . I think it's part of my father because as much as he tried to silence me around

my gayness, he empowered me so much around my blackness. How can that not translate? It had to. You know what I'm saying? The same tools, the same skills, the same insights that he told me what it means to be black in America. I use around what it means to be gay in America. Because I don't see myself thinking as separate from those identities. Those are all a part of me and they go with me everywhere I go.

Xavier sees this pattern of applying his black racial frame as learned within his family, and as a result, the behavior is intrinsic to him. In this instance, Xavier uses the frame as a source of empowerment, interpretations and strategies of resistance in dealing with the joint experience of racism and homophobia/heterosexism in his life. "John," a 27 year old research associate living in the northeast, similarly describes the use of a black racial frame as a technique of survival.

I think that some of the resilience technique that black people – I know that we've always had to use, and our destinies can't always be patterned after someone else's. And somewhere along the line, we still get off track. And I know I do all the time, but there always seems to be something that puts me back in place . . . I learned the importance of not forsaking black people.

For John, the frame not only provides a pattern of responses for negotiating oppression, but also facilitates his connections to other black people. This extends our general understanding of the way in which frames can be deployed in that here, John's use of the frame creates more than just a pattern of shared approaches to and perspectives of the social world, but also actual social bonds and affinities between him and others who use them. "Jerome" is a 24 year old nursing assistant from the south east who employs an imagined dialogue with a white gay man to explain how use of the black racial frame shapes his experience of being a black gay man.

We know what it is to be hated. So I don't think they [white gay men] understand how it is to be hated. You feel that gives you a leg up somehow - in terms of an insight that white gay people don't have? U-hum! What is it? What little extra

does that give you? That I am strong. And you know that I can understand your hurt. I can see where you coming from. I can just hug them and just say I understand how you feel. I can't say that I've been there but I understand. My ancestors have been where you at, that is being disowned in spite of what you do. We were never liked by whites. That's the issue that being gay and being black you know. I don't think that I'm better than that person that was disowned. That white gay male that was disowned by his family, because in a sense we are equal and in a sense we are not.

Some scholars (Boykin 1996; McBride 2005) have asserted that black gays and lesbians are better equipped to understand and respond to the experience heterosexism better than white gay men. They suggest that the initial socialization to race creates an understanding of the nature, operation and experience of oppression, and as a result black gay men are less likely to respond to heterosexism with shock and indignation. Thus in this example, we see Jerome use a black racial frame to draw parallels between his experiences with racism and his encounters with heterosexism. In the factitious discussion between himself and a white gay man he links the two types of experiences via similar feelings of alienation. On a similar note, "Bernard," a 40 year old business manager living in the southeast, uses a black racial frame to explain a recurring pattern of physical and violent crimes that have occurred at the neighborhood gay clubs in his town when they sponsor events catering to black gay men

[T]he black gay community is just a synopsis of the black community as a whole. We fight because for the most part, we have no political, social or economic power. But we have physical power, and that the only power we can exercise. We can't change anything in city hall or buy our own bar, so we have physical power. That's why we always kill each other, because we ain't got nothing. But you got your reputation on the street . . . Just look at black gay people. We don't exist. We have no organizations per se.

Bernard's applies an analysis of social power that has aided his interpretation of black men's behaviors, to explain this similar pattern of behavior at black gay events. His

account also discursively juxtaposes black gay men with heterosexual black men, suggesting not only are their experiences organized by the same racialized systems of inequality and limited access to social power, but that this systems produces similar motives and behaviors for both.

The use of the black racial frame to interpret and negotiate matters of sexuality and the experience of constructing a black and gay identity is to be expected. Most gay men and women only discover and build a non-heterosexual identity once they have developed an awareness of their sexuality as there is no “initial socialization” to gay life. In contrast, we have described that black gays and lesbians are generally raised with an awareness of their racial identity, and exist within system of family and community support that aids them in the development and maintenance of that identity. Thus the racial frame that is both developed and regularly sustained by the inescapable realities of race, generates an easily accessible framework for negotiating daily experiences with sexuality.

CONCLUSION

As this project has demonstrated, there are a great many anecdotal and academic conversations of black gay life which tend to emphasize the incompatibility of homosexuality and blackness. This framing constructs black gay men in exclusively pathological terms and assumes that the lived experience of being black and gay can only be tragic and fundamentally alienating from blackness. Green (2007a) and Moore (2009)

have endeavored to challenge this presumption by positing a more central analysis of race in examining the lived experience of gays and lesbians of color, this work draws only limited conclusions about black gay life, and in the case of Green (2007a) only sees race as creating a negative influence on the lives of black gay men. I have tried to extend this focus on race as an organizing structure in the lives of gay black men to demonstrate its ability to more comprehensively shape the experiences of black gay men, and positively ground social actors within the community. What I found was that in stark contrast to the pathological depictions of black gay reality, these participants relate strong commitments to being counted as part of black America, and therefore engage in a number of practices to facilitate this connection. While this chapter deals most directly with the factors and practices that pull and root these black gay men into black families and communities, it is important that we see these phenomena as part of a larger constellation of activities aimed at more fully integrating black gay men within black collectivity.

The narrative and intersectional analysis that guides this project is particularly useful to unearthing the complex ways that race emerges as a central feature of black gay men's lived experience. As opposed to conceptualizing race and sexuality as mutually exclusive domains for constructing social life, seeing them as mutually constituting and interacting systems recognizes that social actors might resist ideologies and practices that force them to choose one aspect of their social identity over the other, and to take critical notice of the specific social constructions that create the experience of forced choice and exclusion. Moreover, the intersectional framework allows us to note the

innate contradictions that appear to emerge in this process – such as the use of elite discourses to remediate marginal status, or the deployment of race in order to assert the duality of one's identity.

Perhaps what becomes most evident through these data is that there is empirical support for the Collins' (2004) primary theoretical claims in discussing the current state of black sexuality in America. She has argued that there is little indigenous formal (or informal) critique of contemporary black discourses of identity. The unthinking consumption of media-produced black images, she claims, has generated a prescriptive black presentation that only reifies long- standing racist stereotypes and images. As a result what passes for masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality in contemporary black America, reinforces not only limited constructions of black sexuality; but does little to facilitate black social progress.⁷⁴ Until these connections are more readily noticed and discussed, black gay men may be the only canary in the coal mine encouraging us to take a more complex and critical view of both race and sexuality in America.

⁷⁴ A claim we have seen made by several of those interviewed and by Anderson (2004), Douglas (2004) and Griffin (2004a).

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: FOUR NOTES ON BLACK GAY MEN'S COUNTERNARRATIVES

I began this project with the claim that this would be a dissertation about stories. Generally, at the conclusion of a story, the author will provide some account of whether or not the work has achieved its goals by summarizing the lessons or insights imparted by the work. My primary goal in this work was to highlight the cultural narratives told by and about black gay men in order to broaden our knowledge of their lived experience, and to enhance our understanding of how organizing structures of race, sexuality and gender produce that experience. So in this concluding chapter, I devote space to reflecting on what I've learned (and tried to convey) about the lived experience of black gay men, and what those experiences teach about the race and sexuality in American life. To guide this discussion of the project's empirical and theoretical contributions, I return to the four questions listed at the close of Chapter I which helped organize this research project. In the sections that follow I provide a response for these questions that is guided by the data. While the questions provide some way of circumscribing and focusing this discussion, I will confess in advance to blurring the boundaries somewhat.

WHAT DO THESE STORIES TELL US ABOUT BEING BLACK AND GAY IN AMERICA?

I opened with the claim that much of what is publically discussed and academically examined about black gay men expresses a deeply pathological and tragic view of these actors. Considered in light of what black gay men tell us about their lives, it is difficult to ignore how these discourses reflect black gay men's complete and utter social marginalization. Undoubtedly alienated by race, black gay men also experience marginalization as a result of black antiracist efforts that base the demand for social inclusion on assertions of black respectability and moral fitness. Such representations have traditionally cast black homosexuality as not just simply immoral, but as antithetical to the project of black social and political progress, as innately incompatible with black identity, and as a complete capitulation of one's manhood to whiteness (Collins 2004; Riggs 1991; Summers 2004; Wolcott 2001; Welsing 1991; White 2001).

Thus it would seem that fundamental to being black and gay is the experience of being cast out of black community and to have one's racial (and gender) authenticity challenged. This creates a particularly vulnerable and untenable status given the racialized structure of American society. Not only do black gay men find themselves potentially unrooted from their existential moorings, but are disconnected from networks and communities that provide strategies, information and support for managing daily racist encounters. This can have particular importance given that claims of racial bias in the broader gay community have been made by scholars and activists alike (Altman

1982; Boykin 1996; Lewis & Stevens, 1996; McBride 2005; Vaid 1995). As a result, we have seen that black gay men endeavor to remediate black gay manhood as an acceptable part of the black diaspora. This process is discursive, cultural and interactive and can be seen in discourses (and performances) of super black manhood; contests over the cultural practices of Christianity; and their claims to black collectivity.

While intersectional theorists recognize that social marginalization can be uniquely experienced, critical theorists provide a useful language for understanding the condition of marginalization that appears to innate to the experience of black gay men. Black gay men could be said to occupy an abject status in society. Abjection refers to a social object that is so degraded and debased that it is cast out of society. The object symbolizes something so horrible, that it cannot be faced because its existence disturbs the symbolic order (Kristeva 1982; Scott 2010). While it is clear that black gay men are cast out and are degraded in society (both for their sexuality and for their blackness), their existence within the black community forces a confrontation with the terms of black collective identity and antiracist practice. While much of that practice has been predicated on an assimilation of white values (respectability and heteronormativity), this has not been openly acknowledged. Thus, contending with what it means to be black brings to the surface, important questions about the boundaries of race in everyday practice.

WHAT STRUCTURES ARE IMPLICATED IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES ABOUT BLACK GAY MEN?

The structural forces and social interests that combine to produce the regulation of black gay men's social experience are many. White racial interests organize perhaps the broadest and most indirect contours of this regulation as white racism has ideologically and culturally produced notions of the black body (and black sexuality) as an object of pathology and derision that required containment. A less frequently discussed (or perhaps acknowledged) aspect of this containment has been the use of heteronormativity to consolidate white cultural, ideological and demographic superiority within a seemingly neutral framework of "normality" and "social acceptability" (Carter 2007). Thus while whiteness came to be defined by its affinity for good marriages (where there was also great sex and significant procreative potential); blacks have continued to be defined by their presumed distance from this norm (promiscuity, unstable families, etc.)

Hearing the accounts of black gay men revealed that black antiracist efforts have more poignantly structured their social exclusion than the direct actions of whites. This is not necessarily to suggest that white racism has not been influential in their alienation. The extraordinary heteronormative investments in black manhood, the reverence for sexual propriety (or silence) black Christianity, and the somewhat inflexible associations of these notions to authentic blackness appear fundamentally directed to the remediation of anti-black constructions, but have collectively produced the debasement of black

homosexuality. But what is interesting about these efforts is what they cause us to question about the nature of racist practice in America.

This project has questioned whether purely structural readings of American racism or purely constructionist readings of sexuality provide the most robust explanation of the experiences of black gay men. We are accustomed, as social scientists committed to the critical assessment of American race relations, to scrutinizing white actions (and actors) for where, when and how they enact racist assumptions about blacks. But perhaps this practice draws attention away from more subtle or imprecise (but no less insidious and deadly) manifestations of racist subordination and inequality as they manifest at the cultural level particularly in collaboration with other systems of inequality. The experiences of black gay men would suggest that perhaps it is at the cultural level where race masquerades as culture that the practices and norms of whiteness or white normativity are embedded in everyday experiences in complex and unexpected ways. At this level, these norms can be enacted by a variety of social actors to produce racialized outcomes in places and ways where they are least expected. I have endeavored to characterize this complexity and fluidity with the term “multidimensional” throughout this project to suggest that it is possible that even in our diligence we have developed blind spots that have left us less cognizant of important sources of racialized power (and vulnerabilities) that shape everyday experience. While race continues to form the broad structural framework that shapes racialized interactions, at that level, it appears that we cannot always rely on social actors to act and interpret that framework in the most obvious and direct ways. Thus it is perhaps neither the

structural or the cultural per se, that best explains some aspects of racialized social experience, but the intersection of the two that provides the most useful and the newest insights into how race is lived daily.

WHAT SOCIAL PROJECT IS ACCOMPLISHED BY THE STORIES TOLD BY BLACK GAY MEN?

Narratives of being a Super Black Man, the narratives of religious authenticity, or of black collectivity, the personal accounts told by black gay men function as a series of subversive tales, or counter narratives about race and sexuality. These accounts directly challenge prevailing representations of black gay manhood as an inauthentic portrayal of black manhood, as separate from black collective identity and as fundamentally immoral or pathological. Not only do they reveal the structural foundations of these accounts within the unexamined white norms that undergird many black antiracist practices, they provide alternative representations of black gay men to dispute the normative accounts of black gay men as innately tragic figures who are dangerous to the black community. For example, being a super black man means providing financially for one's family, and contributing important demonstrations of status and prestige to the overall project of black respectability. The open inclusion of black gay men's subjectivity to black Christian cultural practices broadens the terms of black identity and of black Christian identity; while creating openings for black sexuality to be an acknowledged part of this sacred space. Finally, the effort to remain connected

to black communities facilitates more genuine and open relationships within these communities and reveals the centrality of race in the lives of black gay men. Notably, while many of these accounts rely on elite or dominant social formations to assert themselves, their use appears to generally be strategic and do not construct black gay men as more important or powerful than their peers (albeit sometimes as more informed), but as an integral member of the community. Thus contrary to those accounts that see black gay men as intrinsically aligning themselves with whiteness, we see that black gay men fundamentally understand themselves to be black men, and seek acknowledgement of this truth from their families and communities.

HOW IS THE STORY TOLD BY THESE MEN SHAPED BY THIS SOCIO HISTORICAL MOMENT?

How is it that this historical and cultural moment produces an account of being a black gay man that is fundamentally connected to his blackness, and seeks redress of those representations which place him at odds to the black community? It would seem that there is no single event that has generated these accounts of black gay manhood. In fact there are arguably many conditions that produce these counter narratives. Clearly living in the wake of the AIDS/HIV pandemic, the social force this brings to accounts of men living on the down low (Boykin 2005; Phillips 2005), coupled with recent efforts by black churches to align themselves with traditionally anti-black social movements (Khan 1998; Pharr 1996) creates a major push for black gay men to give voice to an identity

that is centrally located within the black experience. As such, the counter narratives examined here endeavor to provide ample evidence of the “authentic blackness” of its narrators and thus justify inclusion. Moreover, the post-industrial moment (Wilson 1980a, 1980b) may have generated for some black gay men – particularly those who leave their families and communities of origin to more openly explore their sexualities – opportunities social mobility that embolden demands for sexual visibility. With financial resources and independence also comes the capacity to mitigate the lowered status brought on by their sexuality by SBM performances and the like. The push for sexual visibility, and any perception of its value or importance, may undoubtedly be a product of the increased social visibility of gays and lesbians over the last several decades (Vaid 1995). Moreover, the fracturing of gay identities that has characterized this same period has undoubtedly created space for a separate account of black gay men’s lives to emerge that contrasts with the mainstream coming out story which Plummer (1995) identified as the prevailing account of gay life. Finally, while claims regarding the contemporary period being post-racial remain vigorously debated (Wingfield-Harvey & Feagin 2009); racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights era has become more difficult to see (Bonilla Silva 2003; Houts-Picca & Feagin 2007). This transformation in how racial hierarchy is manifest; coupled with a growing black middle class (Wilson 2009) (a group in which black gay men appear to be over represented) appears to have generated sufficient instability in the notion of a collective black experience or identity for this alternative account of black life to emerge. Finally, it is impossible to ignore what influence I as a researcher, might have had on the particular accounts I received. It is likely that

participants found, in the opportunity to share their lives and experiences with another only black gay man, the chance to discuss that aspect of their stories which emphasized race hoping for a understanding ear.

This is not to suggest that were it not for these factors that this account could not have emerged. The trajectory of black gay and lesbian organizing has been toward greater visibility within the black community (as opposed to the gay community, although it could be said that early organizing efforts were largely aimed at competing with mainstream gay and lesbian organizations). It is likely then, that what this project has captured is simply the latest stage of that collective effort.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As I stated at the beginning of this work, no one project can accomplish everything. It was my goal to share the broadest story possible about the experience of black gay men and how they create social identity. I was asked by my participants to tell the most comprehensive and authentic story that I could tell. To accomplish this, I had to make some conscious choices about what parts of the story would be told and which could not. For example, this project does not explore those aspects of participants stories that deal with interracial encounters, or (more broadly) how white racism shapes their social experience. I did not choose to investigate regional or age cohort differences in the participant's experiences. Nor did I examine the role of participant's erotic encounters or the impact of AIDS/HIV in their narratives. Given the dearth of information on black

gay men's lives, there is much more work that can and should be done to provide a more complete picture of the nature of black gay men's experience of the world.

This project endeavored to shed light on black gay men's social identity production. The data revealed that the process of becoming a black gay man is an artful and creative project of resistance that attempts to disrupt and extend monolithic notions of black Christianity, black masculinity and black collective identity. The project is multifaceted, multi-layered and most likely, never ending. It is an inherently paradoxical process that involves simultaneous acts of resistance and conformity and which weaves together elements of existing discourses of gender, race, sexual desire and faith. While the complex, considered negotiations that characterize black gay men's identity work are a reflection of their placement in interlocking structural and discursive frameworks of race, sexuality, gender and class; they also shed light on how these structures (particularly race) are enacted in their daily experience. We have tended to assume that structures function in obvious and predictable ways. This may not always be true and suggests that there is still much about the operation of race that we do not understand and must continue to investigate if we intend to both understand and dismantle these structures in practice.

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APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FORM

PERSONAL

1. Nationality

U.S. CITIZEN NATURALIZED CITIZEN NON-U.S. CITIZEN _____

2. Racial/ethnic background

BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN AFRO-CARIBBEAN AFRICAN IMMIGRANT HISPANIC/LATINO
BI/MULTI-RACIAL _____ OTHER _____

3. Age _____

4. You have sex ...

EXCLUSIVELY W/ WOMEN MOSTLY WOMEN, SOME MEN WOMEN & MEN EQUALLY
MOSTLY MEN, SOME WOMEN EXCLUSIVELY W/ MEN

5. Which of the following terms comes closest to how you describe your sexual orientation?

GAY BISEXUAL TRANSGENDER QUEER IN THE LIFE ONE OF THE CHILDREN IN THE
FAMILY SAME GENDER LOVING TWO-SPIRIT STRAIGHT/HETEROSEXUAL OTHER

6. Length of time “out” 0-1 YR 2-5 YRS 6-10 YRS 11-15 YRS 16-20 YRS > 21 YRS

RELATIONSHIP STATUS

7. Marital status NEVER MARRIED DIVORCED SEPARATED WIDOWED MARRIED

8. Current relationship status

SINGLE DATING IN A COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP IN A CIVIL UNION IN A REGISTERED
DOMESTIC PARTNERSHIP

FAMILY INFO

9. Children? YES NO IF YES, HOW MANY? _____

10. What is your relationship to these children?

BIOLOGICAL PARENT FOSTER PARENT CO-PARENT/STEP PARENT (TO PARTNER'S
CHILDREN) ADOPTIVE PARENT OTHER (AUNT, UNCLE, GRANDPARENT, ETC.)

11. **Home town**_____

12. **Current Residence**_____

13. **Length of time at current residence**_____

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

14. **Highest level of education completed:**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 MA PHD/OTHER

15. **Current profession/occupation** _____

16. **Length of time in current profession/occupation** _____

17. **Previous types of work done** _____

18. **Current household income (annual)**

\$0-\$10,000 \$10,001-\$20,000 \$20,001-\$30,000 \$30,001-\$40,000 \$40,001-\$50,000
\$50,001-\$60,000 \$60,001-\$70,000 \$70,001-\$80,000 \$80,001-\$90,000 \$90,001-
\$100,000 >\$100,000

19. **Number of people in household** _____

SOCIAL

20. **How connected or involved are you in the lesbian/gay community?**

VERY SLIGHTLY/NOT AT ALL A LITTLE MODERATELY QUITE A BIT EXTREMELY

21. **How connected or involved are you in the black community?**

VERY SLIGHTLY/NOT AT ALL A LITTLE MODERATELY QUITE A BIT EXTREMELY

22. **How connected or involved are you in a black, gay community?**

VERY SLIGHTLY/NOT AT ALL A LITTLE MODERATELY QUITE A BIT EXTREMELY

RELIGION**23. What is your religious preference?**

CATHOLIC BAPTIST AME PENTACOSTAL MUSLIM JEWISH BUDDHIST HINDU
AGNOSTIC/ATHEIST OTHER_____ NONE DON'T KNOW

24. How often do you attend religious services?

MORE THAN ONCE A WEEK ONCE A WEEK 2-3 TIMES A MONTH ONCE A MONTH
SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR ONCE A YEAR NEVER DON'T KNOW NOT APPLICABLE

25. How often do you pray?

SEVERAL TIMES A DAY ONCE A DAY SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK ONCE A WEEK
LESS THAN ONCE A WEEK NEVER DON'T KNOW NOT APPLICABLE

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. With regards to your race, sexual orientation and gender, by what do you call yourself? What terms or labels do you use?
2. Is either aspect of your identity more important than the other? In other words, is your race more important, or your sexual identity, or does everything have equal importance to you? Why do you feel this way?
3. Is the way that you identify now, the way in which you have always identified?
4. How would you tell the story of how those definitions of self have changed over time resulting in how you have come to define yourself as you do today?
5. Is there anything that you feel that you have not told me, or which you expected me to ask you that I have not asked, that you wish to tell me before we are done with the interview?
6. Let's start at the beginning of your story, tell me what life was like for you as you were growing up? Who is in your family? What was your family like? Elementary school?
7. Which kinds of messages did you receive while you were growing up about what it meant to be a black man? About gay people? About the idea of black men being gay? What were the source(s) of these messages?
8. When did you first begin to identify as a man/boy/gay/Black? How did you know you were a man/boy/gay/Black? Can you tell me how this happened? Can you relate an example of this awareness? How has your sense of yourself as a man/black man/gay black man, etc. changed over time? Can you give me an example of one of these turning points?
9. I want to invite you to help me think about something. I recently heard a story in which a black gay man described being invited to a strip club by a former college friend. Unable to quietly get out of going, he felt he had no choice but to come out to his friend. Once he did, the friend said "Oh that explains everything. When we were in school, I used to think that you were just acting white. Now I see that you are just gay." What does this story mean to you? Do you relate to it in any way?
10. What was high school like for you? College (if appropriate)?

11. Tell me about coming out. When did you come out to yourself? To your friends? Family? Are you out at work?
12. Has religion played a role in your life? If so, how? How has it impacted your identity?
13. What specific tensions would you say have characterized your effort to define yourself? In other words, complete the sentence: "I can't be gay because I am also?"
14. What role have intimate relationships (sexual, dating, committed, and/or long term) and choice of partner played in your life? Are there particular choices that are important to you? How have you found these choices to be important in how you define yourself?
15. Some men I speak with have concerns or are cautious about having relationships or interactions with white gay men? They fear alienation, racism and being fetishized by white gay men? Have similar concerns been a part of your experience? Have you heard of/experienced similar or different issues with Black/Latino/Asian American gay men?
16. Have you heard of being 'down low'? What does this phrase mean to you? Has this representation of black gay sexuality been a concern for you in your effort to define yourself?
17. As you consider the journey you've been on to define yourself thus far in your life, who would you say it is that you've become, and who is the ideal person you are trying to become? How does this effort relate to what you see to be your purpose/goal in life?
18. Can you give me an example of when or how you are most authentic? In what way would you say that your identity as a black, gay man is unique and different from that of a white, Latino, or Asian gay male? In what way would you say that it is unique/different from that of other blacks?

VITA

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